

**“He must look upon it as his child  
– and a most promising one it is.”**

## **Earl de Grey and the creation of his house at Wrest Park**

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## **Abstract.**

The house that Thomas, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl de Grey (1781-1859) designed and built for himself at Wrest Park in Bedfordshire between 1835 and 1839 is notable in both design and form. It was built in an 18<sup>th</sup> century French style throughout and has a well-conceived layout. It has an unusually large and well-ordered service wing for its time and was enhanced by the use of emerging domestic technology, particularly regarding the provision of heating and water. De Grey was a skilled amateur architect who designed the house to his own specifications. Despite the house being remarkable in these different aspects it is neither well known nor well regarded.

I would argue that the house is deserving of an examination of all the elements that make it unique, and how those elements work together to create a pleasing and accomplished house. It is my intention to make an account of the genesis and design of the house. In order to do this I have inspected many notable features of the house; why it was built, what influenced de Grey in choosing a French style of architecture, how well it functioned as a complex building type, what can be understood from looking closely at the layout and space planning and what types of technology were installed. I have also looked at the life of de Grey, particularly in relation to Wrest Park.

This work is intended to provide a full account of de Grey and his house at Wrest Park, which will function as a biography of the house in de Grey's time.

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## List of Abbreviations.

BARS	Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service.
BHRS	Bedfordshire Historical Records Society.
DNB	Dictionary of National Biography.
EH	English Heritage.
KUA	Keele University Archive.
PA	Plymouth Archive.
RC VIC	Royal Collections Trust, Queen Victoria's Journal.
RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects.
VCH	Victoria History of the Counties of England.

## Introduction.

In 1834 Thomas, the 2nd Earl de Grey, laid the foundation stone for his new house at Wrest Park. Within five years he had created a unique and beautiful building. It is a country house worthy of attention, but it is somewhat neglected in the annals of English country house architecture. I would argue that the house at Wrest Park is worthy of a greater degree of attention than it has been given up to this point. My intention is to provide an account of the genesis and design of the house. To this end I have examined many aspects of it; why it was built, what influenced de Grey in choosing a French style of architecture, how well it functioned as a complex building type, what can be understood from looking closely at the layout and space planning and what types of technology were installed. All of these elements combine to make Wrest Park a pleasing, unusual and commodious building and yet it is not universally well regarded, so I will consider why this might be the case. I will also look at the life of Earl de Grey. He was, amongst his other achievements, the first president of the Institute of British Architects<sup>1</sup> and acted as his own architect at Wrest Park, but he is not a well known figure and so the account of the house at Wrest will be enhanced by some insight into his life.

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1    Founded in 1834 before being granted royal charter in 1837 after which it became the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA).



Fig 1: Clock Tower, inscription reads "The first stone of this building was laid by Thomas Earl de Grey on the XIIth day of February MDCCCXXXIV".

When I made my first visit to the Wrest Park in 2007 it was in the capacity of my role as Properties Curator with English Heritage. English Heritage (and previously the Department of the Environment) had been responsible for the gardens at Wrest since the 1940s, but the house had only come under their care in 2006. Prior to this the mansion had been used as the offices of the National Institute of Agricultural Engineering, later the Silsoe Research Institute, since the 1950s. The house suffered under institutional use, but the main state rooms had largely been protected and the layout remained intact. Before my first visit I was warned by a couple of colleagues to expect to be enchanted by the garden, but that I would find the house lacking in



charm. A very senior colleague referred to it as “ghastly”. To my surprise I found a rather pleasing house. One might even consider it to be beautiful.

The setting is undeniably enchanting. Wrest Park is known for its magnificent gardens which were first laid out during the early 18th century and represent many of the major fashions in English garden history. Long formal avenues draw the eye to distant vistas, terminated by some of the finest garden buildings in England. Wooded garden rooms give way to serpentine tracks to draw you further into a sense of sylvan magic. The garden is both dramatically beautiful and an important example of an English country house garden. On turning away from the garden to face the house, what did I see? Well, rather than a “ghastly” toad of a house squatting in the garden, I saw a lovely, golden stone façade punctuated with delicate metalwork, a fancy dome and a carefully balanced pair of side pavilions.

When I made enquiries as to why people did not judge the house very favourably the response was non-committal. It seemed to me that amongst admirers of country house architecture there is a received wisdom that French style in an English setting should be a source of scorn. Why should this be so? Could it be as simple as a case of architectural snobbery, born of a perceived association of the style with the 'nouveau riche'? What of de Grey? Was he a nonentity? Was he really the architect?

I decided to address these questions, and to assess de Grey and the place of the house within English architectural history. Once I started looking at de Grey and his house other questions arose. Did the house show de Grey to be a success as an

architect? Was the house unusual in plan and form? Had de Grey been creative and innovative?

The analysis of de Grey and Wrest Park falls naturally into three categories; the man, his choice of style and the way in which the house functions.

The sensible place to start is with de Grey himself. He left behind a large written record, including an unpublished memoir and a remarkable account of creating the house, written in a letter to his daughter. Valued by subsequent generations of his family, the majority of these papers are now kept in the Bedfordshire Archives. These records allow his life and his many interests to be examined. An important element of his life is his interest in architecture, both for his reputation and influence during his lifetime and for his work as an amateur architect.

Having considered de Grey from a biographical perspective the next part of the question relates to the house at Wrest Park, and in particular the choice of French style architecture. Was it unusual for the time? If so, then what led de Grey to select it? How did he arrive at his choice and what resources did he use in order to achieve it?

The third part of this study relates to the non-decorative elements of the house. De Grey's adoption of some technologies and omission of others is an interesting facet to a study of the house, as is the unusual and successful layout of the house, particularly in the family suite and service areas. Was the house typical for the period? What makes it noteworthy, and what elements make it successful?

I have included a full description of the house and service wing to ensure that the account of Wrest Park is comprehensive and useful. I have concentrated on the external architectural style and on the form and layout of the building. I have not included analysis of the interiors except as secondary detail as the house has very few items of indigenous content remaining and my intention is to draw attention to the building itself rather than any collections that it might once have contained.

There are many areas of de Grey's life that might be examined in the future, particularly his involvement with RIBA. However, for this study, I concentrate on de Grey in the context of his house at Wrest Park.

## **The Primary Sources; The History of Wrest Park 1846, and Earl de Grey's Memoir 1859.**

Earl de Grey left a number of documents which have been vital to the writing of this thesis. Perhaps the most important primary source for studying the house is de Grey's own account of its genesis and construction. In April of 1846 he wrote a letter to his daughter titled "The History of Wrest Park", (see figure 2) with the intention of describing the time during which he built his house there:<sup>2</sup>

My Dear Anne, You requested me to give you a detailed account of everything connected with my building at Wrest and its dependencies; with the reasons which induced me to adopt such and such things, or to do one thing instead of another; with in fact, all the twaddle and tedium necessarily connected with such a long winded matter. You are little aware of what you must be prepared to encounter; and how many tedious recitals of the various visits to the Mr Whites and Mr Browns who possessed old carvings, and other things you must wade through. However, as you need never read it more than once and as you need not tell anyone whether you were bored or not, Here goes!

It was quite clear to us all, many years before the place came to me, that something upon a rather grand scale needed to be done, if at all. The old house with its cracked walls and its long passages, and its windows that annually became less capable of being closely shut down, was evidently incapable of any essential repair or improvement.<sup>3</sup>

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2 The original letter, "History of Wrest House", is now in the private collection of one of de Grey's descendants who kindly allowed me to have access to it. A transcription of the letter is available by the Bedfordshire Historical Records Society. A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House". *Miscellanea. Bedfordshire Historical Record Society*, vol 59 (1980): 66-85 and I have provided this reference throughout for the convenience of the reader.

3 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

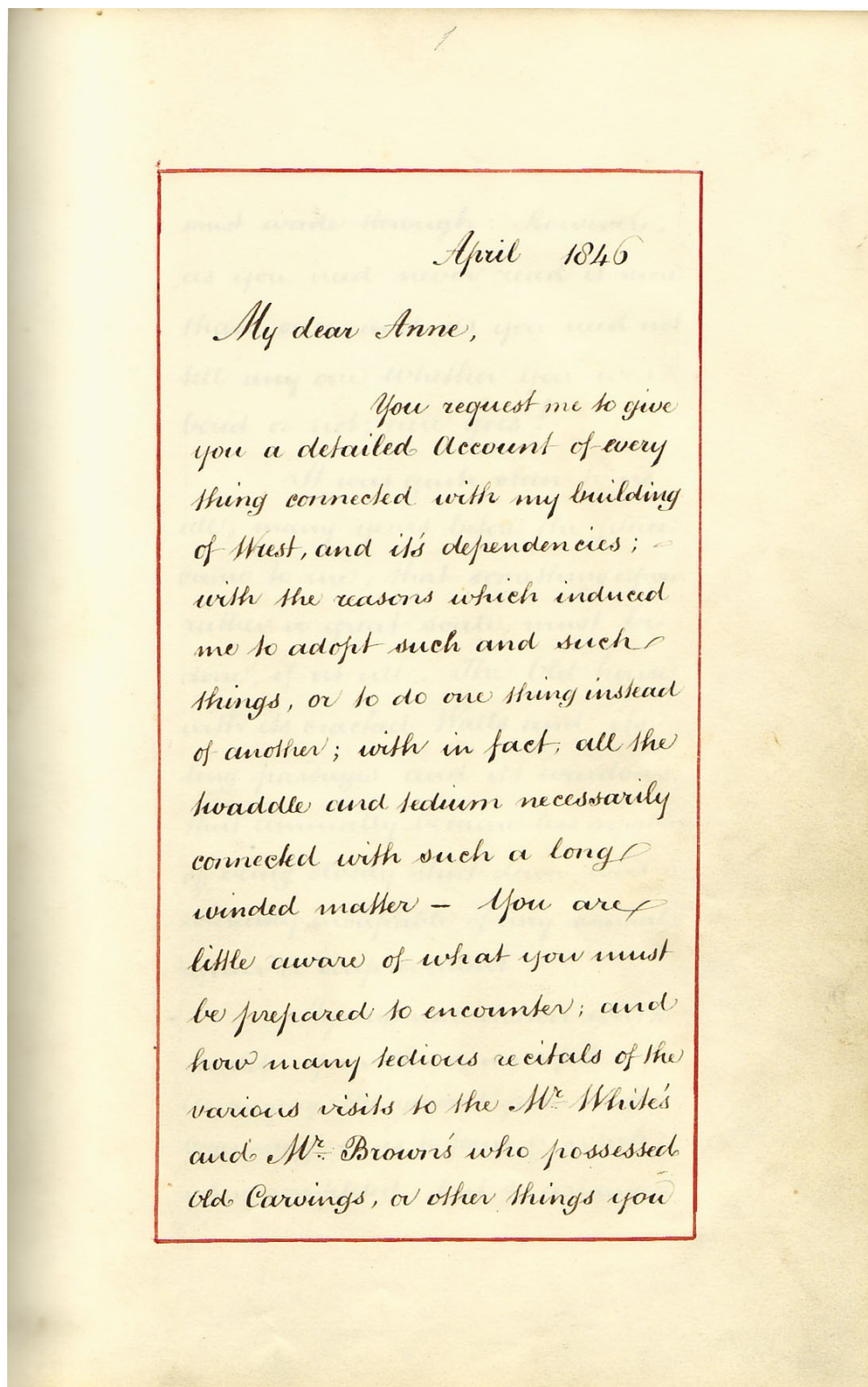


Fig 2: Excerpt from Earl de Grey's letter to his daughter, Anne.  
Original in private collection.

This letter provides what appears to be a full account, not just of the practical elements that de Grey dealt with, but also many of his private thoughts and some indication as to why he made various choices in design and in materials. His voice in the letter is clear. It is of a good humoured man, proud of his house and pleased for an excuse to write about it. In his writing, de Grey provided an organised and sequential account. He opened with his reasons for wanting to build a new house and when he first began to conceive of it.<sup>4</sup>

This section includes an account of visits to Paris and his endeavours in finding French architectural texts. It not only provides information about de Grey's decision to build in a French style, but also gives a colourful description of how, once he had become charmed by the architecture he saw, he went about learning how to draw it and how to find source material, in the form of books, to take home.

Before moving on to a description of the house, de Grey outlined why he chose a different location to the old house and how his plans had developed over the years before he came into his inheritance. Having recorded the starting and completion dates of the construction<sup>5</sup> there is a section which provides his reasons behind being his "own architect".<sup>6</sup> He believed that he had sufficient taste and experience not only to design the place, but that he was capable of overseeing the engineering aspects as well:

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4 "This was several years before my Aunt's death". A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

5 "The new building was commenced on the 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1834, on which day the foundation stone under the southwest corner of the conservatory was laid". "...we finished it so as to get in to reside in October 1839." Cirket, A. F. "Earl de Grey." (1980): 66-85.

6 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey," (1980): 66-85.

...and I also felt that I had such sufficient knowledge of the mechanical constructive branches as would prevent me from building a house merely to fall down again.<sup>7</sup>

A brief, but illuminating paragraph is dedicated to de Grey's hiring of expertise. He names James Clephan as his superintendent and that his aim was to employ a large, local workforce to facilitate a swift construction:

I desired that we should take as many of the workmen as were qualified, and all the labourers from our own neighbourhood.<sup>8</sup>

He was also clear that despite his intention to work swiftly he would not bow to pressure and any indication of the men wanting extra pay would result in their immediate dismissal.

From this point on the letter, which runs to many pages, takes the reader through the house room by room (for the principal rooms) and then moves on to the Terrace and elements within the garden which were changed. The narrative is highly detailed and provides a rich comparison with the house as it stands today.

A further primary source that has been of great use for this piece of work is the self-penned *Memoirs of Earl de Grey*.<sup>9</sup> This memoir, written in June 1859 just months before his death, provides what appears to be a candid and often richly detailed account of his life. In an introductory cover page he reasoned that:

I have often had an inclination to draw up a sort of memorial of my life. It has no striking events connected with it, and has had little to boast of either in public or

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7 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

8 Ibid.

9 The original is in the private collection of one of de Grey's descendants who kindly allowed me access to it. A copy of the memoirs can be found in the Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service (BARS) CRT/190/45/2.

private: but questions are sometimes mooted, and recollections recalled, which cannot always be satisfied at the moment... Many of the things mentioned are, it may be acknowledged, almost childish, and to many persons must be totally uninteresting; but as I recollected them I felt bound to record them, and I believe that I have stated everything with openness and fairness.<sup>10</sup>

The memoir is a lengthy document, filled with detail. It covers many aspects of de Grey's life, including his childhood recollections and the recording of family dates such as births and marriages. It is also a complete account of de Grey's public life. The section that covers the years during which he built his house does not go into as much detail about the construction and end result as the earlier letter to his daughter, but it does provide more information about the administration of the project, including the role of James Clephan, which will be discussed more fully later in this thesis. It does however, recount in similar terms de Grey's adventures in Paris while he was attempting to learn and understand how to design in the French style.

It now falls upon us to consider the reliability of these two primary sources. Looking firstly at de Grey's account of how he built his house it is useful to consider why he wrote it and for whom it was intended. It was written at the request of his daughter Anne, who it might be assumed had sufficient interest in the family home to desire a full written account of it. The tone throughout is familiar, that of an affectionate father to his daughter. It does not have the character of a narrative with higher ambitions.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike other country house owners of the time, de Grey does not appear to have

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<sup>10</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." CRT/190/45/2. I BARS

<sup>11</sup> As Paula Riddy observes, a guide or history book might have been commissioned by a proud house owner as a status symbol. "The books also go beyond the purpose of information; many are objects in their own right, sometimes large and leather-bound, with thick, quality paper and embellished with decorative details and lavish illustrations. They were often of a quality suitable to enhance the library of the house itself or as a collector's object." Riddy, P. "The Representation of the Country House in Individual Books and Guides 1720-1845." (PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 2014), 5.



intended this account to be publicly available, either to visitors of the house or to a wider audience. It does not play a part in how de Grey desired to be perceived by his peers. His position as an architect was almost entirely self-determined and this document might have provided an opportunity to further establish his aim to be seen as such, but the tone and content of the letter would seem to bear out its described intention of being between himself and his daughter, and not part of how he might have wished to be viewed by others.<sup>12</sup> It survives as a bound fair copy, but is unadorned. At the most, his daughter might have shared it with other family members and any close family friends who expressed an interest. If there was no agenda beyond providing a narrative for a small and friendly audience there is little reason for anything other than a straightforward and honest account. Certainly there is nothing contained within it that might cast doubt on its veracity. On the contrary, as we are able to measure the written account against the physical evidence of the house it describes, we are actually able to demonstrate its accuracy. As an example, de Grey recounts that the bas-relief of cupid style figures he acquired for decoration around the upper portion of the walls in the Entrance Hall were re-used from an earlier building and were broken into smaller arrangements to disguise that some of the figures were in fact repeated. On a closer inspection of this feature it can be seen that some of the figures do appear more than once, but it is not immediately apparent due to their ingenious arrangement (see fig 3). This is a specific yet minor

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12 For example, "All the decoration of this portion of the work are accompanied by some recollections which give them an interest in my own mind, tho' except in frank, open, clean heart-strain which I now address to you, are not of consequence to others." De Grey was clear that the letter was written specifically for his daughter, and that others might not be interested in the type of detail he included. A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

detail, and one to which de Grey did not need to draw attention, but it does indicate that his intent was to write an accurate and full record.



Fig 3: Detail of repeated cupid figure in Entrance Hall.

A second example of de Grey's description being borne out by the house he built, also concerns cupids. In this case it is the cupids at the top of the central pavilion of the garden front of the main house. De Grey commissioned from a sculptor named Mr Carew a tableau of "little roguish rollicking tipsey polissons, not stiff classical cupids making serious love to their Psyches without a smirk or a smile",<sup>13</sup> but when they arrived he was very disappointed to find that they fell far below his expectations. De Grey's solution to this was to put one of the local stonemasons already working on the house to "the task of loosening and demoralising my cupids by adding wings and bunches of grapes and drinking cups and flowers".<sup>14</sup> This lively description, which fits very well with the overall tone of the letter might be interpreted as de Grey's way of emphasising his close artistic input into the creation of his house. It also appears to be true. In 2019 conservation work was carried out on the cupid tableau as there were concerns that small elements were becoming detached. What

<sup>13</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

was discovered was that the cupids had indeed been given additions to their original composition. For example, the wings were very clearly added on separately, and are of a slightly different texture of stone.

Throughout the letter there are references which prove to be accurate when assessed against the house. Although this does not prove that everything in the letter was truthful, and de Grey might have been tempted to embellish, there is no evidence to suggest that this source is anything other than reliable.

The other primary source that I have used extensively, de Grey's memoir, can also be examined for its reliability. As he stated in its introduction, de Grey had often considered writing one.<sup>15</sup> Now in his seventies he wrote his memoir, but did not elaborate on why he wanted to do it or for whom it was intended. This has a bearing on the matter, as a private memoir intended for close friends and family might have a different tone to one intended for publication. As with the letter, this document survives as a bound copy, but this time it is as written, rather than as a fair copy. This indicates that whatever de Grey's intention in writing it, he did not move to have it made into a copy for a wider audience within his own lifetime. In terms of analysing its reliability as a primary source we can verify some of the facts contained within it and take this as an indication of a more general candour. He described how he put together the recollections contained in the memoir using a variety of sources:

In the early part of course, I have had little beyond my own personal recollections. Later events have in some cases been recorded in detached memoranda or flying journals, or in the better preserved accounts of the

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<sup>15</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 1. BARS

proceedings referred to: and of course I have referred to all as such as were open to me, though, perhaps without full details or dates.<sup>16</sup>

If he relied upon the materials he had available, it is useful to check the document against other contemporary written sources. There is a great deal of correspondence associated with Wrest Park and the de Greys held in the Bedfordshire Archive. As a measure of the accuracy of de Grey's memoir it is possible to take a date about which he wrote and compare it with correspondence within the same time frame. Where the letters were between people other than de Grey it is unlikely that he would have been able to use them as a ready source of information while he was writing up his recollections. In this way it is possible to testify that much of what de Grey recalled, did in fact happen.<sup>17</sup>

The two documents provide a rich account of de Grey and of his house. They were his own work and so might therefore lack objectivity. It is my opinion however that these two main primary sources that I interrogated during my research can be viewed as reliable documents. While it can be recognised that in writing them de Grey may have sought to enhance his narrative to make them more entertaining, it is hard to point out any provable example of this. After testing a number of specific

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16 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 1. BARS

17 Three examples of events that de Grey described that are verified through other correspondence are listed below. I have deliberately taken minor events as examples rather than important events which would naturally have been recorded. It is in the small, seemingly inconsequential details against which the document may best be measured.

October 1790. de Grey recounted that he started school. CRT/190/45/2. 3. BARS. His mother Mary Robinson makes the same account in a letter to the Honourable Frederick Robinson. Plymouth Archives 1259/1/221.

October 1806. De Grey wrote that he was at Newby Hall at this time. CRT/190/45/2. 17. BARS. Mary Robinson wrote to her sister from Newby Hall in this month confirming that she was there with her son and his family. L30/11/240/192. BARS.

July 1821. De Grey described that he travelled to Cowes a few days after the coronation of Queen Victoria. CRT/190/45/2. 30. BARS. Mary Robinson wrote an account to her sister of spending time with her son and his family and that he had left for Cowes soon after the coronation. L30/11/240/299. BARS.

statements within the documents I would argue that they are both reliable and accurate. In addition to this, they bring de Grey's voice to the fore in this account of his house at Wrest Park.

## Chapter One. Thomas, Earl de Grey.



Fig 4: Thomas Philip (1781-1859), 3rd Baron Grantham, later 2nd Earl de Grey, KG, KP, by William Robinson 1829. © Copyright National Trust.

### Introduction.

Thomas Philip Robinson was born in London on the 8th of December 1781. His maternal grandmother, Jemima Marchioness Grey (1723-1797), was in town

awaiting his birth, but he entered the world so quickly that by the time she and the doctor arrived he was already in his mother's arms.<sup>18</sup> This decisive arrival seems a fitting beginning to what was to be a long and vigorous life. His father was Thomas Philip Robinson, second Baron Grantham (1738-1786), and his mother was Mary Jemima Yorke (1757-1830), the youngest daughter of Lord Hardwicke. Although born a Robinson, de Grey was to be known by three names during his long life. Robinson, Weddell and finally de Grey. I shall refer to him as de Grey throughout this thesis. By the time he died on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1859 he had made many small but vital differences to the wide range of fields in which he was interested. He was well travelled and these experiences were clearly a great influence on him. He would become a founder member and first president of the Royal Institute of British Architects and his hand can be seen in a number of buildings, most notably that of Wrest Park House in Bedfordshire. He had a lifelong love of acting and in later life took great pleasure from putting on theatrical performances for and with his family and friends. He was a keen yachtsman at a time when the sport was in its infancy. He was committed throughout his life to the Yeomanry, particularly the Yorkshire Hussars, of which he was the commanding officer for many years. He was one of the wealthiest landowners in England and he was Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire from 1818 until his death, a responsibility which he took very seriously. As a peer he was involved in politics, and his brother Frederick, Viscount Goderich was for a brief period the Prime Minister. De Grey was the First Lord of the Admiralty from 1834 to 1835 and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1841 to 1844, a period of increasing unrest in that country. Although it was not unusual for an aristocratic gentleman of the era to

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<sup>18</sup> Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), 110.

have such wide ranging interests, it is perhaps more unusual to find one who became so committed to his passions. In his memoir he said:

Without vanity I may say that there are very few things of which I do not know something. I am afraid that the phrase “Jack of all trades and master of none” may apply; but the general liking and wish to know, and indeed to practice, many different trades, has been a source of much pleasure to me all my life.<sup>19</sup>

He may have modestly considered himself to be “master of none” but there are some areas of his life, most notably yeomanry and architecture, in which he should be considered to have been an expert.

## Parents and Childhood.

De Grey's father, the second Baron Grantham, had an illustrious career as a diplomat and politician. The family seat was Newby Park in Yorkshire. His political career had started in 1761 when he became the Member of Parliament for Christchurch in Dorset. He then served for eight years as British Ambassador in Madrid, before a brief spell as Foreign Secretary in 1782.<sup>20</sup> He returned from his posting in Spain in 1779. He was now in his early forties and felt that the time had come to marry and settle down. He sought the advice of an old friend, Lady Mary Forbes. She had been a childhood friend of the Marchioness Grey and so she knew her daughter Mary Yorke, who she at once suggested to Baron Grantham. The couple met and immediately got along very well. Mary's parents were happy with the match and the wedding was held in August 1780.<sup>21</sup> Although there was an eighteen

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19 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 6. BARS.

20 W. D. Jones *Prosperity Robinson*. (London: Macmillan, 1966), 3.

21 Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), 106-107.

year age difference between them it appears to have been a happy match. The birth of their first child, Thomas Philip came in 1781, was followed in 1782 by Frederick John and in 1783 by Philip. The couple settled in to Newby Park, where they began to make improvements to the house, which had been closed up during the years that Grantham was in Spain. Their happiness was to be short lived. In 1786 they moved to a house in Putney after Grantham's health began to decline and in July of that year he died, leaving Mary to a long widowhood.<sup>22</sup>



Fig 5: Thomas, Frederick and Philip Robinson. Joshua Reynolds, 1788. ©Copyright Lord Lucas.

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22 Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), 115.



Although aged four years old at the time, de Grey had vivid memories of the day his father died. He described being in the garden, in sunshine, when his nurse came to tell him the news. After his father's death Thomas was brought up by his mother and her sister Amabel, later Countess de Grey,<sup>23</sup> who had also been widowed at a young age. A portrait painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1788 shows the brothers laughing and playing with two dogs (see figure 5). Again, de Grey recalls this and evidently did not enjoy the experience of visiting Reynolds's house where he and his brothers sat for the portrait:

I have a recollection of going in January 1788 to Sir Joshua Reynolds' house in Leicester Square, when the picture of myself and my brothers, which is now at Wrest, was begun. I thought the place very dark and dull, and the occupation most tiresome. I was most heartily sick of being obliged to sit still and keep my eyes fixed upon a picture with a white horse. How long it lasted, or when the picture actually finished, I do not know. It must have been one of Sir Joshua's latest works.<sup>24</sup>

The Robinsons lived in Putney for most of the year, punctuated by visits to family at Wrest Park and Wimpole Hall. De Grey recalled a happy childhood. During visits to Wrest Park he and his brothers enjoyed camping on the lawn, fishing in the ponds and canals and running amok amongst the geese and swans. Many hours were spent outdoors with his brothers to the extent that on rainy days his grandmother Marchioness Grey would be concerned about him getting into mischief when confined to the house.<sup>25</sup> During his youth he discovered what was to become a lifelong passion for yachting. He would later build a house at Cowes on the Isle of

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23 The family name of de Grey was resurrected by her daughter, Amabel Hume Campbell, who became the 1st Marchioness de Grey. The ducal title of Kent that the family had used in previous generations had by this time become a royal title.

24 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 2. BARS.

25 Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), 117.

Wight, where the family would spend their summers whilst he sailed his succession of yachts. When in 1829 he and his son sailed the length of the Caledonian Canal it was, “I believe the first gentleman's yacht that had ever done so”.<sup>26</sup>

## Education.

De Grey's parents started the education of their children whilst they were still very young. They gave him lessons each day and by the time he was two and a half he could read and write simple sentences.<sup>27</sup> After his father died his mother continued to tutor her three boys at home. In 1790, at the age of nine, de Grey left Putney for Greenford, where he attended the school of Dr. Glasse. This small private school educated about twenty boys at any one time. He was slow to settle into the school because at first he missed his brothers.<sup>28</sup> His brother Frederick was also to attend the same school, before moving on to Harrow, but in his memoir de Grey makes no mention of Harrow for himself.<sup>29</sup>

De Grey seemed to have enjoyed school, and made a wry acknowledgement that his titles meant that he was singled out for more leniency than his classmates. On the death of his father he had become the third Baron Grantham and the death of a cousin in 1792 gave him the title of sixth Baronet Grantham of Newby.<sup>30</sup> The 1792 inheritance was to shape de Grey's life in ways that he was unaware of as a child.

When describing it in his memoir he wrote that:

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26 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 40. BARS.

27 Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), 115.

28 Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), 121.

29 Although Joyce Godber, when writing about the school at Greenford goes on to say, “From this school the boys progressed to Harrow.” Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*, 121.

30 See appendix 1 for a list of de Grey's inheritance.

Without any pretence of modesty or disinterestedness I may say that the news of the large fortune made very little impression upon me... Little as I then thought of it, it was in fact the foundation of the position in life which I have since had to fill.<sup>31</sup>

It was his position in life that enabled him to build the house at Wrest Park, perhaps seen by him as part of his duty as a landed aristocrat.

In later life, de Grey filled his time by staging theatrical performances and it seems that a love of performing was instilled during his time at school. In his memoir he recalled how he was always selected to play the female roles. Whether this was due to his being smaller and prettier than the other boys or perhaps to a greater willingness is not made clear.

Mary Robinson was to know more sadness when her youngest son Philip, died in 1794 aged eleven. De Grey was away at school at the time and was unsure of the cause of his brother's death. He thought that it had perhaps been an accident. This seems strange. The Robinsons were a close and warm family, particularly for their time and class, and it strikes a strange note that he was never curious enough to ask his mother about the loss of his younger brother.

At Christmas 1797 de Grey left the school at Greenford. At the leaving ceremony he and the other boys wore powder and a pigtail, perhaps the last generation to do so. He went on to attend St Johns College Cambridge and he graduated with a masters Degree in 1801 at the age of twenty. His father had been at Christ's College Cambridge and it seems that the choice of St John's College for de Grey was down

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31 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. BARS.

to the influence of his mother's family, the Yorkes, many of whom had been educated there.<sup>32</sup> Leaving school for the relative independence afforded by being a university student was an event that de Grey recalled fondly in his memoirs, written over sixty years later:

I accordingly entered as a nobleman at St. John's College, and I well recollect the self-importance with which I took possession of my rooms up the middle staircase on the right side of the court, early in January. I poked my own coals with my own poker, I made my own tea out of my own tea-kettle with a satisfaction which I can remember to this day.<sup>33</sup>

He was attended at university by a servant, Daniel Lawrence. Lawrence was from the village of Silsoe, which lies at the entrance to Wrest Park. In his memoir he does not say why Lawrence was chosen to be his servant other than that he had been his mother's footman, but his grandmother, the Marchioness Grey had died in 1797 and perhaps his Aunt Amabel, who had inherited Wrest was partly responsible for the choice. She took a keen interest in her nephew and the two were very close. As her heir, de Grey began to gradually take on increasing responsibility of running the family estates and the choice of a Silsoe local as a servant is representative of this. In his memoir de Grey does not dwell upon his time at Cambridge. He clearly enjoyed his first taste of adulthood, and in his memoir looks indulgently back at his younger self. He showed off to his younger brother during a visit to him at Harrow, dressed smartly and with his own horse and groom and was "a very great man in my own estimation".<sup>34</sup> He stated that he made regular attendance to hall and lectures, but that he attended chapel only once. It is to be assumed that religion played a part

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<sup>32</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 5. BARS.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

in de Grey's life and his wife seems to have been quite devout, but his memoir does not leave the impression of a man over-burdened with religious fervour.

Upon graduating from Cambridge de Grey immediately made plans to travel in Europe. The assassination in March of Emperor Paul of Russia had changed the political climate just enough that travel to Russia might be possible although in order to move freely through Europe de Grey felt that travel would be easier if he was in uniform. Although it is not clear why he felt this, it was to this end that he, "...got a commission in the North York Militia, under the Lord Dundas of that day, and obtained long leave of absence to travel".<sup>35</sup> After being delayed for a few days at Great Yarmouth the weather finally settled and de Grey began a year long tour of the German states, Russia and then on to Paris. Although in his account of the building of Wrest Park House he states that it was a later visit to Paris in 1822 when he became fascinated with French styles,<sup>36</sup> it is safe to suppose that this first trip left an impression on him.

In his memoir, de Grey recounts an occurrence which is included here to provide some insight into his trusting nature and sheltered outlook. During his first European tour he had been conned out of £25 by a man calling himself Captain Cunningham, who had told a rather hackneyed hard luck story and a promised repayment. De Grey realised the crime when his banker in Paris contacted him to tell him that Capt. Cunningham had attempted to secure a further payment of £100 from the bank by using documents with de Grey's forged signature. De Grey was relieved that he had

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35 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 7. BARS.

36 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 31. BARS.

only been robbed of £25 and put the incident down to experience. In 1803 he was approached by a woman claiming to have been married to and then abandoned by Capt. Cunningham. She asked for de Grey's assistance in funding her return to Russia, a request with which he complied, commenting, "I had no reason to doubt her statement".<sup>37</sup> Given that this account was written towards the end of his life it seems rather naïve of him to give money without any suspicion that he was once again the victim of a financial con. He evidently had a rather trusting nature, which, coupled with an innate sense of duty relating to his position in life, seems in this case to have made him easily duped.

De Grey was inclined to remain in Europe for a time and had been offered a place on a Navy vessel sailing to Constantinople. He had come of age but as he was abroad he had become a ward of Chancery. He needed to return to England to claim his inheritance and also to please his mother, who had written that she missed him terribly. On his return to England de Grey began the legal and practical processes to start his life as a land-owning adult. He spent a good part of 1804 in Yorkshire where he became an officer of the Yeomanry, a connection which he took highly seriously and which was to shape the rhythm and routine of his years for the rest of his life. He was almost contemporary in age with Jane Austen, who was born only six years before him and as such her books refer to the period of his early years. The sense of obligation felt by the nobility and gentry in England during the first decades of the 19th century is a theme of much of Austen's work and can be seen as a background for the world in which de Grey lived.

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37 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2.16. BARS.

## Marriage and family.

By 1803 de Grey was living in a house in Charles Street, Berkeley Square and during this period he first met his future wife, Lady Henrietta Cole (1784-1848), the youngest daughter of Lord Enniskillen, whose family seat was at Florence Court in County Fermanagh. He initially saw her during the Boroughbridge races and was “very much struck with the beauty and figure of the young lady”.<sup>38</sup> He was able to meet her formally during one of the social events associated with the races and they enjoyed talking together.



Fig 6: Lady Henrietta Cole (1784-1848), Lady Grantham, later Countess de Grey by Thomas Lawrence.  
©Copyright National Trust.

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38 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 14. BARS.

In 1805 he took a house on Sackville Street. He had not met with Lady Cole (see figure 6) since September 1803, despite attempting to. He did not know anyone who knew her family and was unable to secure an introduction. He finally saw her again in May 1805 at a party held by Lady Heathcote. He found her “handsomer than ever”.<sup>39</sup> He pursued her more ardently and after a successful proposal they were married in July 1805. They spent a ten-day honeymoon with his mother in Putney before travelling to Newby Hall, his house in Yorkshire, for which they began to purchase furniture.

Lady Henrietta Cole, or Nett as she was known by her family, seems to have been both an attractive and well-liked woman. There are references to her transcendent beauty,<sup>40</sup> and surviving portraits confirm this. In 1838 Queen Victoria recorded in her journal, “Lady de Grey is a very agreeable, amiable person; she was exceedingly handsome and looked remarkably well; she is really astonishing considering that she is nearly 54,” and of her “... excessive beauty”.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the correspondence associated with the family there runs a thread of Henrietta's poor health and she seems to have been of a fragile constitution, and a regular visitor to health spas. Although this was a fashionable pastime for the wealthy during the period it would appear that she made these visits for the perceived health benefits as well as for the opportunities for shopping and social activities presented by spa towns. Letters written to her daughters during the 1820s show a woman with greater religious

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39 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. BARS.

40 W. D. Jones *Prosperity Robinson*. (London: Macmillan, 1966), 26.

41 RC VIC/MAIN/QVJ(W) 22 March 1838 RC VIC/MAIN/QVJ(W) 20 September 1838.



conviction than her husband. Her prayers and virtuous advice in the letters provide a portrait of piety in keeping with her background and status.<sup>42</sup>

As was common during the period the de Greys were to have a number of children. Sadly, as was also common during this period only a handful survived. Of five children, Thomas was to be survived by only two; his eldest daughter Anne and his middle child Mary. A son, Thomas Philip died in infancy and a daughter named Amabel died aged eleven. His remaining son Frederick William died in 1827, shortly before his twenty-first birthday, probably of tuberculosis.<sup>43</sup>

As will be seen later in the analysis of the family wing of Wrest Park House, de Grey and his wife were very attached to their children and to family life although coupled with a number of miscarriages and stillborn infants, the joy of family must have been tempered by grief.

His brother-in-law Sir Galbraith Lowry Cole (1772-1842) was a soldier and had been wounded at Salamanca. Despite this he was sufficiently recovered to be called to France in 1815 as Napoleon's troops were massing for what was to be the Battle of Waterloo. De Grey desperately wanted to join him, but good sense prevailed as Cole told him not to place himself in danger when "neither honour nor duty called".<sup>44</sup> In fact the battle was so quickly and completely resolved that de Grey was indeed able to accompany Cole to the Duke of Wellington's headquarters at Gonesse, leaving Ramsgate on 29th June. Having been told that Paris was "at his disposal"<sup>45</sup> de Grey

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42 Anne Florence Robinson: the gift and writing of her mother. 1 Sept 1821- 18 Oct 1824. L31/112. BARS.

43 Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedfordshire Historical Record Society. 1968), 527.

44 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 22. BARS.

45 Ibid.

found a suitable house in which to stay on the corner of the Rue de Gramcourt. Despite a chilly reception from the surly femme de charge, he settled down for what he believed to be the first night of his life in which he was solely responsible for himself, having brought no servant. Having established that Paris was now quite safe de Grey decided to return home to collect his wife Henrietta and Lowry Cole's new wife Lady Frances (d.1847). He carried despatches from Castlereagh, perhaps to validate his travels, and by August had returned to Paris with the ladies for a leisurely spell of sightseeing and antique buying. He was very pleased to be able to buy such things as "Buhl" (Bouille) style cabinets which as they were not à la mode in Paris were relatively plentiful and cheap.

Having safely delivered Lady Cole to his brother-in-law, de Grey and Henrietta travelled to Le Havre where his yacht the Mermaid was waiting to sail them back to Cowes. One of the most momentous battles in European history became the backdrop for a pleasant and diverting trip for the de Greys.

## **Public Life.**

Around the time of his marriage de Grey began to take his seat in the Lords with greater regularity although he would "never have any particular vocation that way".<sup>46</sup> He attended Lord Melville's trial at Westminster in 1806 (see figure 7). Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742-1811) was impeached for misappropriation of public funds in relation to his time as First Lord of the Admiralty. He was acquitted but was never to hold public office again. In his memoirs de Grey gave no indication

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46 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 34. BARS.

of his private feelings about this, the last impeachment of a Lord, and one with whom he had a connection through his Admiralty commission. De Grey only spoke twice in the Lords, once during the parliamentary debate about Queen Caroline and George IV in 1820, to voice his lack of support for the proposed divorce bill, and again when the Reform Act of 1832 induced him to such strength of feeling that he spoke out about the “infamous and unconstitutional mode in which it was done”.<sup>47</sup> Although he took his duties very seriously de Grey did not consider himself to be a politician. This career fell to his younger brother Frederick who in 1827 was created Viscount Goderich and became Prime Minister. This followed the death first of the Prime Minister Lord Liverpool in February of that year, followed by the death of his successor Canning in August. Parliament was in a fractious state at the time with an uneasy Tory/Whig coalition and perhaps Goderich was chosen by the King for his apparent amiability and personal popularity as well as being safely Tory. He was not to prove a strong leader and was replaced by Wellington after only six months in office.

Late on a Sunday evening in December of 1835 de Grey received a message summoning him to meet with Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850) as soon as he was able. De Grey knew that Peel, who had only days before becoming Prime Minister, would ask him to take public office, a task for which he had no enthusiasm. This turned out to be the case; Peel wanted de Grey to become Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. De Grey declined, telling him of his “unwillingness, and I might say unfitness for office”.<sup>48</sup> Peel pressed de Grey over the succeeding days, finally asking him whether he might be

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47 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 41. BARS.

48 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 47. BARS.

persuaded to take up any other office. "I said that with the feelings I had already expressed, I would wish to decline altogether; but that if I were compelled, I should feel better acquainted and have more power of doing my duty with the Navy than with any other".<sup>49</sup> Peel was content to grant this and de Grey was sworn in to the Privy Council on 30<sup>th</sup> December, to take up the post of First Lord of the Admiralty.

De Grey was not happy with his new duties, mainly because the position came with an official residence. He had only recently completed works to his London home in St James Square and wanted to make it his principal London address:

I had, as I have already stated, just finished my own house, of which I was not a little proud; and where I calculated upon giving dinners and parties and producing considerable effect. The official residence was therefore an encumbrance.<sup>50</sup>

He settled upon living at St James Square and only using the official residence as an office. This was to prove useful when in April of the following year a discrete venue was required in which to hold a cabinet meeting where it was decided that the strong opposition to Peel's government, which still held despite some gains in the recent general election, meant that he would have to step down. This meeting was held in de Grey's sitting room. He was saddened for his friend Peel, but glad to be able to stand down as First Lord of the Admiralty.<sup>51</sup>

In 1841 Peel was Prime Minister once more and again wanted allies in senior positions. He pressed de Grey become Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, a post he still had no inclination to take up. He was still enjoying his new house at Wrest Park and his

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49 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 47. BARS.

50 Ibid.

51 CRT/190/45/2. 48. BARS.

London home and had no wish to leave them for Dublin. As no one else was considered suitable for the task he accepted. Casting around for a solution to the situation in which he found himself, he turned to the writings of Wellington, whom he greatly admired:



Fig 7: The Trial of Henry Lord Viscount Melville, in Westminster Hall. After Pugin and Nattes. c.1806. ©Copyright The British Museum.

I had been reading the despatches of the Duke of Wellington, and had been forcibly struck with the noble way in which he always sacrificed every private

wish in the execution of what he deemed public duty. I asked myself whether, with this professed admiration of a noble character, I could as an honest man decline following the example; and whether I could respect myself and feel that I had done my duty if I declined upon no better grounds than private disinclination.<sup>52</sup>

Having settled the issue in his own mind he duly accepted the office and he served as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland until 1844. Perhaps he regretted his dedication to duty as he spent at least half of his time as Lord Lieutenant writing to Peel requesting to be relieved of his post, often citing ill health. During his time in Dublin he appears to merely have been a calming influence rather than able to advance the deteriorating situation. During his three years in Ireland he felt that he had seen very little outside of Phoenix Park, the residence of the Lord Lieutenant.

## **The Yorkshire and Bedfordshire Yeomanry.**

De Grey professed that he would have liked to live a soldier's life. Although he did not manage this he found consolation in his involvement with the yeomanry. In 1818 de Grey became Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire. He was the heir apparent to one of the county's largest estates and so this made him an eligible choice, although the honour had often fallen to the Dukes of Bedford. The current Duke's support for Hone,<sup>53</sup> "a scurrilous political scribbler of the day",<sup>54</sup> had led to him no longer being considered suitable to hold the position and de Grey was only too happy to step into his shoes. He was to hold the post until his death. From this time he would occasionally inspect the Bedfordshire Yeomanry although his heart lay with the

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52 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 54. BARS.

53 Presumably William Hone (1780-1842) a bookseller and writer of political satire and campaigner against government censorship.

54 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 26. BARS.

regiment under his command in Yorkshire. He had been the commanding officer of the Yorkshire Yeomanry since 1804, as a connection with his landholdings at Newby and elsewhere in Yorkshire.

The years between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Reform Act of 1832 were characterised by civil unrest, particularly in the north of the country. This in part led to a strengthening of the Yeomanry and in 1817 two new troops of fifty men were added to the Yorkshire Hussar Regiment. Although de Grey had a financial commitment to the regiment in the form of uniforms, ultimately he received payment for each man in the regiment from His Majesty's Government and so this was one, albeit modest, source of income.

The assassination of the Prime Minister, Perceval, by a merchant with a grievance against the government highlights that the ruling classes did at times feel vulnerable. De Grey delayed going up to London for the summer as he was afraid that there would be "disturbance in the country,"<sup>55</sup> and although there was none this perhaps shows that de Grey believed that the people would seize any opportunity to create trouble for those in power. To de Grey, paternalistic regard for those for whom he felt responsible included discipline at any sign of dissent.

In 1819 a friend sent de Grey a copy of the *Black Dwarf*, a "low scurrilous weekly paper in London"<sup>56</sup> in which there was an article about de Grey (Lord Grantham at the time) and the Yorkshire Yeomanry.<sup>57</sup> The writer of the article took particular

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<sup>55</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 20. BARS.

<sup>56</sup> CRT/190/45/2. 28. BARS.

<sup>57</sup> See appendix 2 For a transcribed copy of the article.

delight in mocking the moustaches of the troops, insinuating that the yeomanry, calling themselves Hussars, had grown luxuriant facial hair as part of the masculine image suggested by the name and saying that they would not be formidable opponents in real military action. A report of de Grey's closing speech at the annual inspection of the Yorkshire Yeomanry was used with satirical glee:

His lordship thanked them for their attendance, and concluded by expressing his wish to meet them next year; and hoping they would all go home and shave their upper lips, kiss their wives and sweethearts, and as they had been good soldiers whilst they wore the military garb, they would be good farmers when they got home and put on their plain clothes”, the article went on to say, “Do they not perceive they were only the jest of his lordship?”<sup>58</sup>

De Grey was so incensed by the article that on reading it he immediately left Yorkshire for London. On arrival he went directly to the offices of the *Black Dwarf*, pausing only long enough to purchase a walking cane. Once there he berated Wooller, the editor of the paper, and demanded to know the author of the letter and that a full apology be printed. When Wooller refused both of these demands de Grey called him a “damned rascal”<sup>59</sup> and beat him with his cane. He left the premises hastily, but not before a small crowd had gathered and made him feel very threatened. He swiftly calmed down and realised that he may have made a terrible mistake. He spent the next few weeks fretting that action would be brought against him although there do not seem to have been any repercussions and his name was not mentioned in the *Black Dwarf* after that.

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<sup>58</sup> *The Black Dwarf*, June 1819.

<sup>59</sup> “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 28. BARS.



This incident seems rather out of character for de Grey. He appears to have had an innate sense of his superiority, particularly over men like Wooller whom he did not consider to be a gentleman, but despite this he does not appear to have been an especially hot-tempered man and perhaps this uncharacteristic violence should be read as confirmation of the strength of feeling and pride that he had in the Yorkshire Hussars and his shock at being personally mocked by a writer from the lower orders.

Another reason for his rage might have been motivated less by personal pride and more from the direct attack on the privilege of the landed classes that was also described in the paper. The constant threat of unrest in the years running up to the Reform Act of 1832 and the use of the Yeomanry Regiments to control any suggestion of civil demonstration meant that they were unpopular in some quarters where it was thought that the ruling classes were using the yeomanry as small personal armies. Certainly radical papers like the *Black Dwarf* were beginning to question them. The concern was that:

...the yeomanry institutions are a stratagem of the Pitt system, to array one portion of society against another, and to destroy by dividing the people, it is important while the finances will not allow of so great a standing army being kept up, that the real nature of these yeomanry should be exposed. They are generally speaking the fawning dependents, or the supple slaves of the great.<sup>60</sup>

Was this perhaps a little too close to the truth for de Grey, who considered himself to be a friend to men of all stations in life while being ideologically committed to preserving the status quo?

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<sup>60</sup> *The Black Dwarf*, June 1819.

## Building projects.

By August 1806 de Grey was a father and living with his family in a house on the corner of St James's Square, just doors from the de Grey London home which he anticipated inheriting from his aunt. He also inherited land from a distant relative in Craven in North Yorkshire, adding to his already considerable portfolio of property. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1807 his wife gave birth to their second child, a son and heir, Thomas Philip. It was also in this year that the family spent the first of many summers at Cowes on the Isle of Wight, where he hired a yacht for the duration of their stay. He already considered himself to be a highly skilled sailor and was beginning to plan how he might afford to build a house in Cowes. He was considering building projects elsewhere too. The house at Newby did not have a library of sufficient size to house his considerable collection and he devised a plan to convert the dining room to a library. This alteration required some disruption to an existing hall and staircase and de Grey sought the help of an architect named Shaw.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this was the same Shaw used by de Grey in his early plans for a house on the site of the old house at Wrest Park, drawn up in 1818 and swiftly disregarded. The work at Newby was in 1808 and was to be his earliest attempt at an architectural project. The dining room had been designed by Robert Adam (1728-1792) and in the 1980s the current owners of Newby restored it to its earlier incarnation, thus obliterating de Grey's first fully-executed design. The Adam interiors at Newby are well-regarded, if a little over-restored, and it is a signal of de Grey's

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61 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 18. BARS.

confidence and lack of squeamishness that he was able to sweep away an existing scheme, particularly one attached to an architect as well known as Robert Adam.

A passing comment in the memoir is of interest. In the spring of 1810 de Grey gave “a plan and the ground and a subscription towards building a new chapel at Skelton”.<sup>62</sup> Skelton was a chapelry near to Ripon on land belonging to de Grey.

Whilst it is not strange that de Grey felt compelled to assist financially with the replacement of the existing dilapidated chapel, it is interesting to note his use of the word “plan”. It seems likely that he specified the layout of this chapel and gave his opinion on the architectural style of this building along with financing it.<sup>63</sup>

By 1812 de Grey felt that his finances were sufficiently sound to begin work on his long-cherished project of building a house at Cowes, on a piece of land that he had purchased in 1809. “I made my own designs, but I employed as a builder a Mr Andrews... He was I believe an honest man, but ignorant; which caused me much further expense a few years after”.<sup>64</sup> This further expense occurred when it was discovered that the foundations of the house were failing and that the building was moving down the slope towards the sea. This was the first time that de Grey was unequivocally the architect of a project although he was not yet experienced enough to have taken responsibility for checking the foundations of his building. Perhaps this experience instigated some further study by de Grey because by the time he built his

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62 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 19. BARS.

63 This chapel is St Helen's Church in Skelton cum Newby. It is of a very plain construction with small perpendicular windows.

64 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 19. BARS

house at Wrest Park he felt that he had sufficient knowledge to design a building that would not “fall down again”.<sup>65</sup>

The family were to spend many summers at the house in Cowes, but once the children were a little older de Grey spent less time yachting and they visited less frequently. The family do not appear to have used the house once de Grey had inherited Wrest. The house had been sold by the time he died and subsequently passed through a number of hands. By the mid-20th century it had become a hotel named Grantham House before finally being demolished in the early 1990s.<sup>66</sup> Only a few images of the building remain, but it does not appear to have been particularly noteworthy (see figure 8). In the 1967 edition of his architectural guide to Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Pevsner does not mention the house specifically, merely describing the road on which it stood as being, “...more varied is Queen's Road: detached houses, gabled or Italianate”.<sup>67</sup>

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65 A. F. Cirket. “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

66 [http://old-iwight.onthewight.com/living\\_here/libraries/images/Bricks\\_and\\_Mortar.pdf](http://old-iwight.onthewight.com/living_here/libraries/images/Bricks_and_Mortar.pdf) p. 6 [Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2019]

67 Nikolaus Pevsner. *The Buildings of England. Hampshire and the Isle of Wight*. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd. 1967), 743.

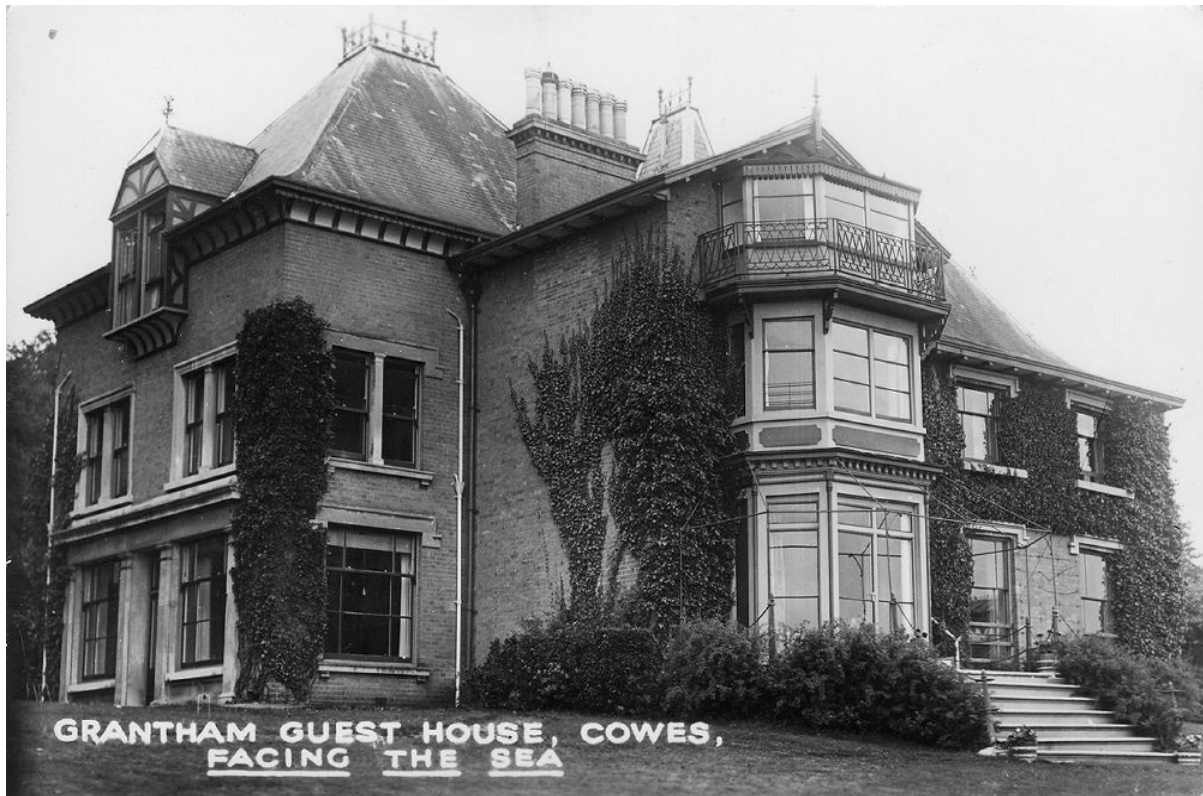


Fig 8: Grantham House. From a postcard of unknown 20th century date.

Although it was the first complete building which de Grey claimed as his own design it was not the lure of becoming his own architect that drew him to Cowes, but the fact that it was a fashionable location for the wealthy to spend their summers on the waves. De Grey's first yacht, the Mermaid, was completed in the same summer as his house, and it was this that consumed his time and enthusiasm, presumably whilst his wife and daughters made the rounds of shopping and social engagements back on dry land. After the coronation of George IV in 1820 the new king came to Cowes before sailing on to Ireland.

In 1822 de Grey was elected as a member of the United Services Club. This was a gentlemen's club that was open only to senior army and naval officers, and its high

annual fees led to it being one of the most highly esteemed. In 1826 it was decided that the club needed new headquarters. At that time it was on the corner of Charles Street and Regent Street, but the demolition of Carlton House on Pall Mall gave an opportunity to build something new. De Grey was asked to chair a building committee for the new club, which he gladly accepted, even delaying his return to the family who were in Paris at the time. Amongst the other members of the committee was Colonel Caldwell of the India Company Service, who de Grey considered to be the most knowledgeable of the group in matters of architecture. The appointed architect was John Nash but de Grey found his style to be “much too conspicuous”.<sup>68</sup> Although Nash was to design the exterior of the whole of Carlton Terrace the interiors of the United Services Club were left to the club committee. De Grey argued successfully against the reuse of a marble staircase from the demolished Carlton House as he felt that it was too small for the space. By making drawings of both the effect of using the marble staircase and also a proposed design of his own he was able to say that he was responsible for the design of the staircase, which is extant.

In 1824 de Grey designed and built the pair of lodges at the Silsoe gates. These are in the French style that de Grey would later adopt for the main house. In 1829 he decided to finance the addition of a steeple to St James's, the Silsoe church that lies at the entrance to the main driveway of Wrest Park. The church was probably 13th century in origin and the structure could not support the extra weight of a steeple, leading to a collapse. De Grey put this down to design problems and offered £4000

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<sup>68</sup> “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 35. BARS.

towards the building of a new church on the same site. An architect from Hertford, Mr Smith, was commissioned for the work, but de Grey “furnished all the design”<sup>69</sup>. He was pleased with the result, which is an unpretentious and rather pleasing little church in a fairly plain style with some Gothic elements. Pevsner attributed the church to Smith and described it as “An astonishing job for its date. The architect, *Smith* of Hertford, achieved an antiquarian accuracy here extremely rare ten years before Pugin”.<sup>70</sup> The architect was Thomas Smith (1798-1875) who had an architectural practice in Hertford from the 1820s. Colvin credits Smith as the executant architect for the church, employed by de Grey.<sup>71</sup> Taken together, these sources point to de Grey as having designed or been instrumental in designing a church that predicted coming styles and was carried out successfully. The choice of a relatively straightforward country church style for St James’s demonstrates that his vision for the buildings on the estate did not extend to the village. He seems to have chosen for each of his architectural projects a style appropriate to the function and setting of the building, rather than having a preference for any one style.

## The de Grey Inheritance.

The issue of a title for de Grey had first arisen in 1799 when Prince Edward was given the title of Duke of Kent. This meant that although Kent had been a Grey family title it had ceased to be used after the death of the last direct male heir and now it had been a royal title it could never again be used for the family. As there was no

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69 “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 39. BARS.

70 Nikolaus Pevsner. *Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press. 1968), 144.

71 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press. 1995. Third edition.), 901.

male heir of age at this time the issue remained unresolved but by 1816 the question was raised once again. There were a number of names to which the family had connection, but all (including Goderich) were discounted as being too distant. Grey would have been favoured, but had already been conferred on Earl Grey de Ruthin, and so the family name of de Grey was chosen and thus Aunt Amabel, Lady Lucas, became Countess de Grey of Wrest.

In 1833, when de Grey was 51 years old, his Aunt, the Countess de Grey died, leaving him the title of 2nd Earl de Grey along with lands and houses that he had so long anticipated. The first changes he made were not to Wrest, but to the London house, no. 4 St James' Square. The house still stands and is now home to the Naval and Military Club. The house had been purchased in 1682 by the Earl of Kent. When de Grey inherited the house it was considered to be too small and low for contemporary use. He demolished parts of the house and knocked through his late Aunt's bedroom and dressing room to create a single large room, "a very handsome dining room on the principal floor – a feature not very common even in the best houses".<sup>72</sup> A ground floor back parlour was knocked through to create an inner hall at the bottom of the stairs. De Grey often seemed mindful that the staircase should reflect the status of the building with the culmination of this idea being the magnificent Staircase Hall at Wrest House. De Grey also designed changes to the façade of the house with the first floor windows being extended to reach the floor, with small balconies outside. "Having made all my plans and designs, I put the work

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72 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 39. BARS



into the hands of Mr Browne who had been our clerk of works at the United Service; and of Mr Harrison who had also been at the club as a builder".<sup>73</sup>

De Grey then turned his attention to his newly inherited estate in Bedfordshire. The estate at Wrest Park has its origins in the 11th century and had belonged to the de Grey family from the beginning of the 13th century and continued to be in their possession until the death of the 9th Baron Lucas in 1917. It was improved by each generation, with particular emphasis on the gardens, which remain among the most complete examples of English garden history in the country. When de Grey inherited the large family home, of medieval origins with later additions and re-modellings, it was considered old fashioned and, more importantly, in an irredeemably poor condition. This led de Grey to the decision to demolish it and build a new house. Building an entirely new and large house at Wrest Park was the fulfilment of de Grey's crowning ambition. He built it and all the associated buildings within the space of only five years.

By November 1839 the house was complete. De Grey had struggled at times to maintain the momentum he desired. He was anxious to complete the house without delay and he states that the only difficulty was financial, but that this was overcome. So keen was he for the project to be discharged as quickly and successfully as possible that he employed a hands-on approach. He was not of the temperament to simply specify what he wanted and then oversee from a distance. "We pushed forward everything as rapidly as we could; that I was up every ladder, and upon every scaffold from early morning till dusk; and that we finished it so as to get in to

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<sup>73</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 44. BARS.

reside in October 1839.”<sup>74</sup> He created the house, service wing, stables, extensive walled garden including housing and hothouses, brew house, dairy, and workshops all as totally new buildings with new footings, in the space of five years. This represents a single minded determination, made even more remarkable when one considers that he was on site for much of the time, personally overseeing the works.

In 1845 de Grey received his final inheritance when Mrs Lawrence died leaving him Studley Royal, now better known as being the location of Fountains Abbey. There was the threat of an inheritance suit and so he hastened to take possession. He was later to lay out a picturesque walk around the Abbey remains known today as the De Grey walk. He also carried out some archaeological investigations of the ruins and on which he presented a paper to the Institute of British Architects.

## **President of the Institute of British Architects.**

1835 brought affirmation for the profession of architect with the founding of the Institute of British Architects. De Grey was invited to be the first president and he was to hold this position until his death. The position of president was to be an annual one but this rule was suspended each year as he was asked to return making him the longest serving president of the body that was to become the Royal Institute of British Architects. When he held his first *conversazione* as president, ladies were invited which was unusual for the time.

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74 A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

De Grey was to be involved in another prominent architecture project when in 1846 he was asked by Prince Albert to form part of a committee to oversee improvements to Buckingham Palace. Edward Blore (1787-1879) was the architect and Thomas Cubitt (1788-1855) the builder. De Grey did not like Blore's designs and put forward some of his own. Charles Read suggests that the facade as built resembles de Grey's designs more strongly than those of Blore.<sup>75</sup> In 1848 de Grey was called to be part of a committee looking into the huge costs of building the Houses of Parliament. By the time he became involved the project was sufficiently committed that he was unable to reduce the costs. He felt that had he been consulted earlier it would have been very different. He considered that he had built Wrest House in a cost-effective manner and it can be supposed that he felt himself highly qualified in managing an architectural project of this scale.

## **Widowerhood and final years.**

The time in Ireland as Lord Lieutenant marked a change for Lord and Lady de Grey, both of whom experienced a deterioration in health. The rest of their lives were punctuated by visits to various spas, both in England and abroad. Although this was a fashionable pastime, de Grey in particular seems to have suffered from poor health or perhaps chronic hypochondria. In addition to spas and traditional doctors he also tried homeopathy.

After the death of his undoubtedly adored wife 'Nett' in 1848, when he was already in his late sixties, de Grey did not retire from public life entirely. He was still much

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<sup>75</sup> Charles Read. *Earl de Grey*. (Barnet, Herts: Willow Historical Monographs, 2007), 31.

involved with the Yorkshire Hussars and with the Royal Institute of British Architects, but he spent more time simply enjoying the company of his two remaining daughters and his grandchildren. Of de Grey's five children only Anne and Mary survived their parents. Much time was taken up with the putting on of theatrical performances at his daughter's house, Panshanger, and at Wrest, where de Grey was to create a theatre by installing an ingenious moving wall in the Dining Room.

Towards the end of his life he was to turn to writing. First with a biography of his hero Wellington<sup>76</sup> then with an account of the building of Wrest House, and finally with a brief memoir, which he completed in the year of his death. He died at his house on St James' Square on 14 November 1859. His heir was his brother Frederick's son George Robinson. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography lists his wealth at the time of his death as somewhat under £100,000.<sup>77</sup>

## Chapter conclusion.

Earl de Grey lived his life as his background and social position had mapped out for him. He lived as a landed aristocrat, participating in public duties and private hobbies alike. He took his position in life seriously and so although he did not wish to pursue a political career he did not shy away from positions in office when persuaded that he was the only man for the job. He appears to have been bright and capable and

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76 Thomas, Earl de Grey. *Characteristics of the Duke of Wellington, Apart from his Military Talents*. (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1853).

77 Boase, G. C. "Grey, Thomas Philip de [formerly Thomas Philip Robinson; Thomas Philip Weddell], second Earl de Grey (1781–1859), politician." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. May 21, 2009. Oxford University Press,. [Accessed 13 Apr. 2019, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-11565>]

applied his skills in a number of areas. He had artistic abilities and good organisational sense. He was an able military officer, managing large numbers of troops and he showed foresight and a certain amount of sensible caution in managing his considerable and numerous lands, properties and country estates. His memoirs and correspondence appear to show a good humoured and affable man, and it may have been these attributes that lead him to hold various offices and sit on advisory boards as well as being the first, and only lifelong, president of the Royal Institute of British Architects. Although good-natured, he had no patience for radicals, be they journalists or workmen under his employment striking for greater pay.

His main legacy was the house that he built at Wrest Park, and the following chapters will look at the building in greater detail.



Fig 9: Monument to Earl de Grey, by Matthew Noble (1817-1876), in the de Grey Mausoleum at St John the Baptist Church in Flitton.

## Chapter Two. Earl de Grey, Wrest Park and French style in English country house design in the 19th century.

### Introduction.



Fig 10: Principal front of Wrest Park House.

In 1834 de Grey was at last able to fulfil his ambition of creating a new house at Wrest; one that would be more fitting in style and magnificence to the setting afforded by the gardens. The great garden at Wrest Park was by then a reflection of all the major fashions and designers of English garden history, but one of the major sources had been French. It was as a response to this that de Grey felt that the French style was the only one to complement the setting adequately. He had apparently considered making changes to the existing house but felt that it was beyond redemption.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> A, F, Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

A series of watercolours painted by de Grey in the years approaching 1834 show a rather charming if deteriorating house, of some considerable size. He also changed the location, stating that the old house had been too near the water and thus plagued by summer insects, but it might also be considered that by building the new house a little way to the north he improved the proportions between house and the main features of the gardens. By this time the gardens were bordered by a network of canals and water features, with an important central axial link from the house, down a straight body of water called the Long Water, to the principal focal point of the gardens, the Archer Pavilion, a large baroque garden building of the early 18th century by Thomas Archer (see figure 11). In locating his new house further to the north, de Grey made an already great garden even more magnificent merely by increasing its size and proportions between the principal architectural elements. De Grey was “my own architect”<sup>79</sup> and although some have claimed that his clerk of works, Clephan was the designer it is central to this thesis that de Grey was indeed the architect of Wrest House.

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79 A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.



Fig 11: The Archer Pavilion, built 1709-11.

## **James Clephan.**

When de Grey began to plan for the building of his new house in earnest, he realised that he would require expertise in some areas. In his memoir he explains at length that he did not feel he required an architect, being experienced enough to discharge the creative elements himself, but that he would require an accomplished clerk of works to assist with some of the more prosaic elements of the project such as buying materials and managing payments of the labourers and to this end he employed James Clephan. He considered that it was more sensible to have the assistance of someone who was not financially interested in doing anything other than delivering the building as specified by de Grey. An architect might see the financial benefits to



themselves of suggesting changes to the building during construction. A larger building might translate into a larger fee. De Grey was keen to avoid that.<sup>80</sup>

Although de Grey asserted that the house at Wrest was entirely of his own design, another hypothesis has been put forward and is occasionally repeated. That is to say that the person responsible for the design of the house was not de Grey, but James Clephan. This perception appears to have come from Pevsner. In his 1968 guide to Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough he starts his description of Wrest Park by introducing de Grey:

He became also first Earl de Grey, and incidentally first President of the (Royal) Institute of British Architects. This is curious, as the house as it now stands and as it was built in 1834-6 was designed, it seems, by an otherwise unknown French architect, *Clephane*, and is absolutely French in style – something unique in England at that time.<sup>81</sup>

Why he thought this is not elaborated on, but it should be noted that he was also incorrect about the completion date of the house, which was 1839, not 1836. The following year saw the publication of Joyce Godber's comprehensive book *History of Bedfordshire*. Joyce Godber had been the county archivist for Bedfordshire for many years and retired in 1968, a year before her book was published. Godber will have

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80 "My general plans, and the greatest part of the minute details were therefore decided upon; and being thus my own architect, and feeling, I must say, without naivety that I knew as much about construction and contrivance as Mr Nash and his clerks, I felt that the 5% usually paid to such gentlemen might as well be applied to general purposes under the charge of an intelligent clerk of works, who should be responsible only for purchase of timber, lead etc., and the payment of workmen's wages; but without anything to do with taste or design. I met with a very clever fellow of the name of Clephan, who received a weekly salary, and who therefore had no personal interest whether my work cost £10,000 or £100,000, except as dependant upon the duration of his engagement. He was recommended to me by Mr Trotter, and had acted in a similar capacity under Lord Barrington (his brother-in-law), who had been an amateur architect and had built his own house in Berkshire, and was fully competent to making all working drawings and keeping the accounts." *Memoirs of Earl de Grey*. 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 46. BARS.

81 Nikolaus Pevsner. *Pevsner Architectural Guides. Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press, 2002 reprint of 1968 edition), 173.

known the de Grey sources very well, but was tentative in ascribing the design of Wrest to either de Grey or Clephan:

Earl de Grey pulled down the old house at Wrest, and rebuilt it in 1834 on a larger scale, largely according to his own ideas (he was the first president of the R.I.B.A.) but helped by the architect James Clephan.<sup>82</sup>

Why Pevsner and Godber doubted de Grey's claims to be the architect is unclear. Jenkins, recognises de Grey as the architect but refers to James Cléphane (sic) as being "French sounding".<sup>83</sup> It is possible that it was simply the sound of the name that has lead to confusion. Other writers are not confused and importantly, there are earlier sources placing de Grey as the architect. The entry for Wrest Park in the Victoria County History, written in 1908, describes the house as being built by de Grey "after his own designs."<sup>84</sup>

In sources written after Pevsner's assertion it is more generally accepted that de Grey was the architect.<sup>85</sup> Girouard writes that de Grey's house was "designed by himself"<sup>86</sup> and when writing about de Grey's house Collett-White makes no mention of Clephan.<sup>87</sup>

So who was Clephan? De Grey described him as a clerk of works and as his superintendent.<sup>88</sup> Colvin names him as James Clephan, going on to state that "the

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82 Joyce Godber. *History of Bedfordshire 1066-1888*. (Luton: White Crescent Press, 1969), 467.

83 Simon Jenkins. *England's Thousand Best Houses*. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 8.

84 William Page ed. "Parishes: Flitton cum Silsoe," in *A History of the County of Bedford: Volume 2*, (London: Victoria County History, 1908), 325.

85 For example, in a letter to Bedfordshire Magazine in 1977 Simon Houfe points out that the architect was de Grey, not Clephane. *Bedfordshire Magazine*. Vol. 16. No. 122. 1977. 88.

86 Mark Girouard. *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 292.

87 James Collett-White. *Inventories of Bedfordshire Country Houses 1714-1830*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1995), 251.

88 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

name Clephan or Clephane is a North Country one,” and suggests that he may have been related to another architect, William Clephan of Stockton-on-Tees.<sup>89</sup> Colvin is in no doubt that de Grey was responsible for the design of Wrest Park, stating that, “Between 1834 and 1839 Clephan acted as executant architect at Wrest Park, which Earl de Grey was building to his own designs.”<sup>90</sup>

Certainly de Grey was considered by his contemporaries to have been the architect. For example, a coeval account in the *Essex Standard* ascribes the design to de Grey.<sup>91</sup> An account of a visit to Wrest by Cecilia Ridley in September 1839 is recorded in a letter to her Aunt and surely settles the issue:

Lord and Lady de Grey are now at Wrest and we went over there the other day to see the new house, which is beautiful and entirely Lord de Grey's own planning. He draws the patterns for all the ceilings and ornaments of every description and then overlooks the execution of all his orders, so that he must look upon it all as his child – and a most promising one it is.<sup>92</sup>

If the misconception around Clephan's involvement with the design of Wrest Park began with Pevsner's words then this has now been rectified. The most recent edition of the *Bedfordshire Pevsner* published in 2014 and edited by Charles O'Brien is unequivocal about who was the architect of Wrest Park. This edition asserts that:

He (de Grey) designed every aspect of the house as it now stands, the details of which are set down in a remarkable forty-five page letter written in the 1840s. To

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89 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 253.

90 Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, 253.

91 “The magnificent mansion now building in Bedfordshire for the Earl de Grey is in a state of great forwardness. The noble lord is his own architect”. *Essex Standard*, Friday 23 August 1839.

92 Ursula Ridley. *The Life and Letters of Cecelia Ridley 1819-1845*. (West Yorkshire: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1958), 33.

superintend the execution in 1834-9 he engaged the little known architect *James Clephan*.<sup>93</sup>

It seems that a mid-twentieth century confusion over the name Clephan has resulted in de Grey occasionally being mis-represented in this matter. He claimed to be the architect and that he used Clephan, a fellow architect, to assist in areas of a more prosaic nature. This is borne out by the surviving plans for the house. The RIBA archive holds plans for each floor of the house, including the service wing alongside a full suite of elevation drawings. These are all attributed to de Grey and appear to have been drawn up by him.<sup>94</sup> There is also a set of plans in the Bedfordshire Archive, including one for each floor of the house plus elevation drawings of the north and south fronts and the walled garden. They are drawn on paper with a watermark of 1832 and although unsigned are also attributed to de Grey.<sup>95</sup> In addition to these there is a basement plan of services such as plumbing and drainage in the Bedfordshire Archive (see figure 12).<sup>96</sup> This one is annotated and seems to have been a working drawing. It is signed by Clephan. This would verify de Grey's assertion that he made the plans, but that Clephan carried out work that did not require a design input.

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93 Nikolaus Pevsner and Charles O'Brien. *The Buildings of England Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press, 2014), 343.

94 Thomas Philip, Earl de Grey collection of drawings, ref Wrest Park, design, c. 1834 (SB53/2 (1-2)). RIBA Archive.

95 Plans for the new house, built 1834-1839. L33/151-162. BARS.

96 This plan is in a different hand to the set of plans and elevations attributed to de Grey. It is dated 1841 and clearly signed by "James Clephan, architect, 18 Warwick Street, Charing Cross." Perhaps de Grey requested a copy of this plan for his records after the completion of the house. L33/162. BARS.

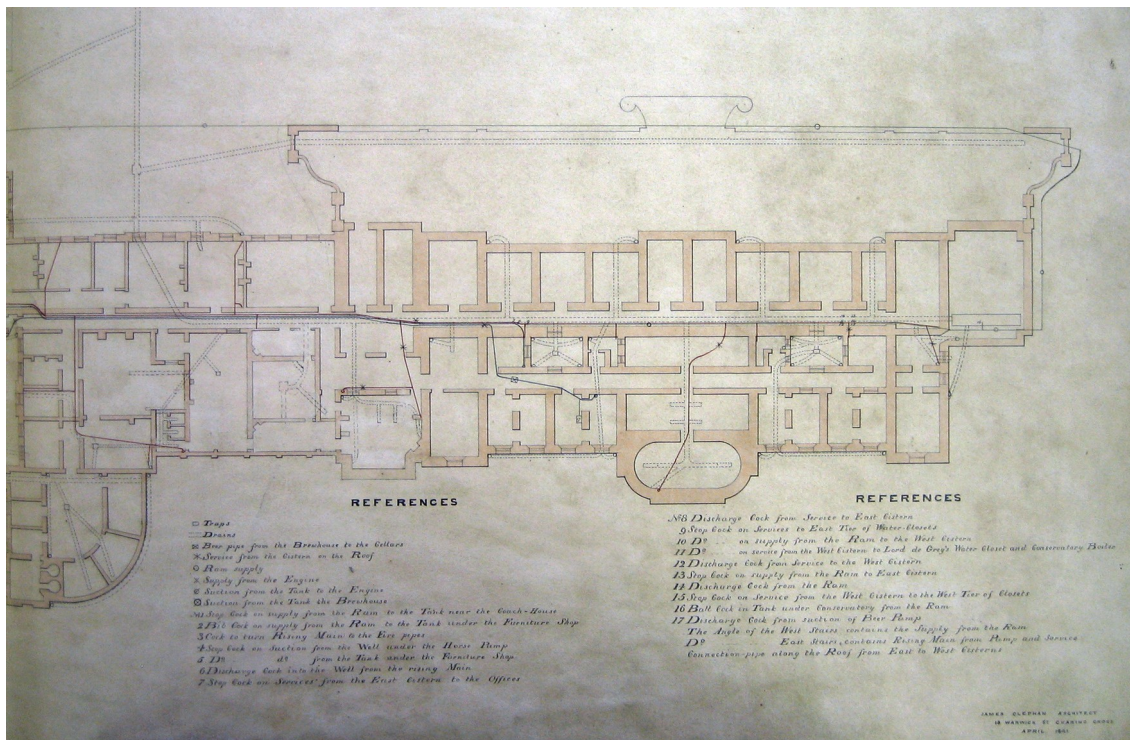


Fig 12: James Clephan's drainage plan. L33/162. BARS.

## Earl de Grey as his own architect.

The pride that de Grey felt in his house resonates clearly in his writings about it. The house can, in all candour, be described as his masterpiece and so it is natural that he might have had a sense of satisfaction. So how did de Grey position himself within that narrative? In his letter to his daughter he recounts a detail of the process of creating his house which provides an enlightening insight into how he saw his house, and himself. In describing the Staircase Hall he moves on to the decoration for the ceiling within the central lantern:

I also had a grand scheme for a picture in the ceiling of the lanthorn, and had a beautiful allegorical design ready — “Taste and Genius conducting the arts and

sciences (all cupids) to construct the new house at Wrest, just beginning to appear amongst the clouds.” There! what do think of my poetical fancy? However it did not take place.<sup>97</sup>

Here is an image of the house coming down from the heavens. De Grey seemed to be saying that his house was of such perfection that it could almost be attributed a divine origin. Might it be considered that in his allegorical design “Taste and Genius” represented de Grey himself? He does not say why the scheme was abandoned, but perhaps modesty got the better of genius in this instance. If de Grey was shy about claiming that his house had celestial origins he was certainly not reticent about declaring himself the true hand behind the creation of the house:

I was as you know strictly and in every sense of the word my own architect.<sup>98</sup>

De Grey referred to himself as “my own architect” on a number of occasions in his letter to his daughter and in his memoir. He was at great pains to fashion himself as the architect and it seems as though he had initially planned to articulate this in an emphatic and unequivocal way by immortalising himself, the architect of Wrest, within the very decorative fabric of the place. The door to the Ante-Library is the most prominent doorway in the house, located centrally and in the direct sight-line of visitors to the house as they enter the Staircase Hall. De Grey described it:

In the shield supported by the figures over the door to the library it was originally designed to have a medallion of myself. Rather vain! You will say. Perhaps so, and perhaps that very vanity prevented it, for the profile when executed was not satisfactory. We tried again, and my face was measured and scanned and copied to the best of our abilities; but it wouldn’t do; it was not thought advisable to

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97 A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey’s account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

98 Cirket, “Earl de Grey,” 66-85.

consign the likeness of so great a genius to posterity in that way; and we substituted other ornaments.<sup>99</sup>

The figures over the door are seated amongst books, and on the spines of three of these are the names Blondel, Mansart and Le Pautre (see figure 30). Why de Grey chose to include the names of three French architects here will be looked at more closely later on, but here we can see that in placing an image of himself on a shield amongst these names, de Grey is fashioning himself not just as an architect, but as an architect amongst equals. That this was his intention can be confirmed by the “other ornaments”. What was substituted in place of a portrait of de Grey is a carved relief still-life of a collection of artists and architects tools. The architect is taking the central position in this tableau, which is itself in a central position in the house. In this part of his account de Grey again employed the term “genius”. It is fair in this context to take the historical meaning of the word genius as being one who creates something due to their superior ability, but still it is an arch comment and one that speaks to us of de Grey’s self-deprecating humour as much as his belief in his own superiority. It was probably a mixture of these two elements. In the end an image of de Grey was included within one of the decorative elements, not in the Staircase Hall but in the principal family room, the Library. The ceiling is decorated with paintings of four muses, of music, poetry, painting and sculpture. The hand of the reclining muse to sculpture rests on a small bust of de Grey<sup>100</sup> (see figure 13).

99 A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey’s account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

100 De Grey commissioned a painter named Wood to create these ceiling paintings, and also the ceiling in the Drawing Room. It was apparently Wood’s idea to include an image of de Grey in the composition. “*(I) gave him the commission for my four pictures of Music, Poetry, Painting and Sculpture. In the latter he thought it would be an appropriate conceit to introduce a bust of myself; it is small, unobtrusive, just over your head, and not very like; and I therefore am not under the necessity of pleading “not guilty” to the soft impeachment of national vanity; but there I am.*” A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey’s account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.





Fig 13: Detail of the library ceiling painted by Woods featuring a bust of de Grey.

This seems to be less of a statement of de Grey's self-fashioning of his identity as an architect than a profile above the Library door would have been. Despite the suggestion that he has a place beside the muse of sculpture, the inclusion of the bust is a discreet nod to de Grey being the author of the creation of the house, rather than a bold declaration.

In fashioning himself as the architect of Wrest Park, it was also important to de Grey that he was seen as a good architect. This is articulated in his description of why he built a Drawing Room, although he felt the family had little use for one:

When I was planning the house I had a great mind to have no such room. It is of no real use in these days, when a library is no longer locked up to the world, and when it is made, as we always do here, the permanent and perpetual living room, especially when it has contiguous rooms at each side, where silent chess-players



or noisy polkas may go if they wish. But custom required it, and being an amateur architect people would have imagined that I had omitted it.<sup>101</sup>

De Grey was a man who had many interests, but in his musings about how or if he might commit his image as the genius architect behind his house it can be seen that architecture was a major passion for him.

## **Section 1. Wrest Park.**

### **The Old House.**

Before looking closely at the house that de Grey built it is worth briefly looking at the house that preceded it. This is an overview of the history and development of the house and is here to set the scene for de Grey's inheritance.

When Earl de Grey inherited Wrest Park, the estate had already been in the family for centuries. An early mention of the de Grey's ownership of the estate at Silsoe is in the Feudal Aids of 1284-6, with Reginald de Grey being named, although it was John Grey of Shirland in Derbyshire (c.1205-1266) who first acquired the estate, probably through his marriage to Emma de Cauz.<sup>102</sup> The earliest specific reference to buildings or a house on the estate came in 1308 with the description of a 'capital messuage with a dovecote, worth 4s per annum' belonging to Reginald de Grey. It is acceptable to assume that the house in this period would have been equivalent to a

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101 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

102 James Collett-White. *Inventories of Bedfordshire Country Houses 1714-1830*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1995), 243.

manor house of the time. By this time Wrest Park had become the family seat.<sup>103</sup> It probably consisted of a central two storeyed hall with a screens passage at one end and a chamber at the other and perhaps a separate kitchen building and stables. It was typical of high status houses of the time to be moated and that may well have been the case at Wrest. Collett-White considers that “the site was moated by 1512 and almost certainly had always been”.<sup>104</sup>

Edmund Grey (1419-90) who became Lord Treasurer in 1463 was first made Baron Grey of Ruthin before being created Earl of Kent. The fortune and status of the family continued to improve over the coming years, with a slight detour in the 1520s when, upon inheriting Wrest Park, Richard Grey, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl (1481-1524) was obliged to sell his birthright to settle gambling debts. The estate was re-purchased by his half-brother Henry, who was dismayed to learn that the new owner, Sir Henry Wyatt, intended to strip the house and estate of its assets.<sup>105</sup> Although the estate was back in the family the title was financially out of reach until 1572, when Reynold de Grey (1541-1573) became the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Kent under Queen Elizabeth I. By this time the medieval house had been developed into a much more substantial building. The core of the house, with a hall and a great chamber probably remained, but there had been the addition of other rooms including a chapel, which was to remain as a visible elevation until the house was replaced by Earl de Grey during the 1830s. There are two watercolours, one by Buckler and one attributed to Earl de Grey, both painted in 1831 shortly before the demolition of the building began, that show the east front

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103 Nikolaus Pevsner and Charles O'Brien. *The Buildings of England Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press, 2014), 342.

104 James Collett-White. “The Old House at Wrest.” *Bedfordshire Magazine* Volume 22, (Spring 1991), 322.

105 James Collett-White. “The Old House at Wrest.” *Bedfordshire Magazine* Volume 22, (Spring 1991), 323.

with a high three part window with a large relieving arch above that appears to be consistent with the appearance of a chapel. In the 1831 watercolour album that has been passed down through de Grey's descendants the description of the east front of the old house identifies it as the chapel<sup>106</sup> (see figure 14).



Fig 14: Watercolour attributed to de Grey showing the East front of the old house in 1831. The presumed chapel window is visible, with the remains of a relieving arch above. Private collection.

An inventory of 1573, assembled upon the death of Reynold de Grey, lists nineteen chambers in addition to the great hall, great chamber, kitchen and staircase. Also

<sup>106</sup> "The Chapel, though without any present remains of antiquity, is probably the oldest part of the whole House. By some old manuscript Memoranda preserved in the Library, it would appear that there had originally been Stained glass windows with Armorial bearings – but none remain." This is the description that accompanies the 1831 watercolour attributed to Earl de Grey, now in the private collection of his descendant Lord Lucas.

listed were a store house, porter's lodge, buttery and low parlour.<sup>107</sup> At this point the house had a central courtyard and was entered through a gate next to the porter's lodge. From this period until the house was demolished it retained essentially the same layout, but with additions accruing over time. It is interesting to note that although the house was now a sizeable structure, it may have been partly just for show, to reflect the status and ambitions of the family. The inventory shows a house that is, in places, very sparsely furnished. It paints a picture of a house that has only a few rooms truly inhabited. Some of the principal rooms barely contained anything at all,<sup>108</sup> although it is worth remembering that landed families often led a peripatetic life between properties and would have taken much of the furnishing and fittings with them as they travelled.

The house continued to be used by the family over the course of the next century, but few details are known until the inventory of 1667. From the inventory it would seem that the house remained much as it had been in 1573 in terms of size and layout, but that more of the chambers were now in use and overall the place was much more richly furnished and better equipped. This is perhaps a sign of increased prosperity or simply an indication of changes in patterns of consumption over the century.

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107 James Collett-White. "The Old House at Wrest." *Bedfordshire Magazine* Volume 22, (Spring 1991), 323.

108 James Collett-White. *Inventories of Bedfordshire Country Houses 1714-1830*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1995), 244.

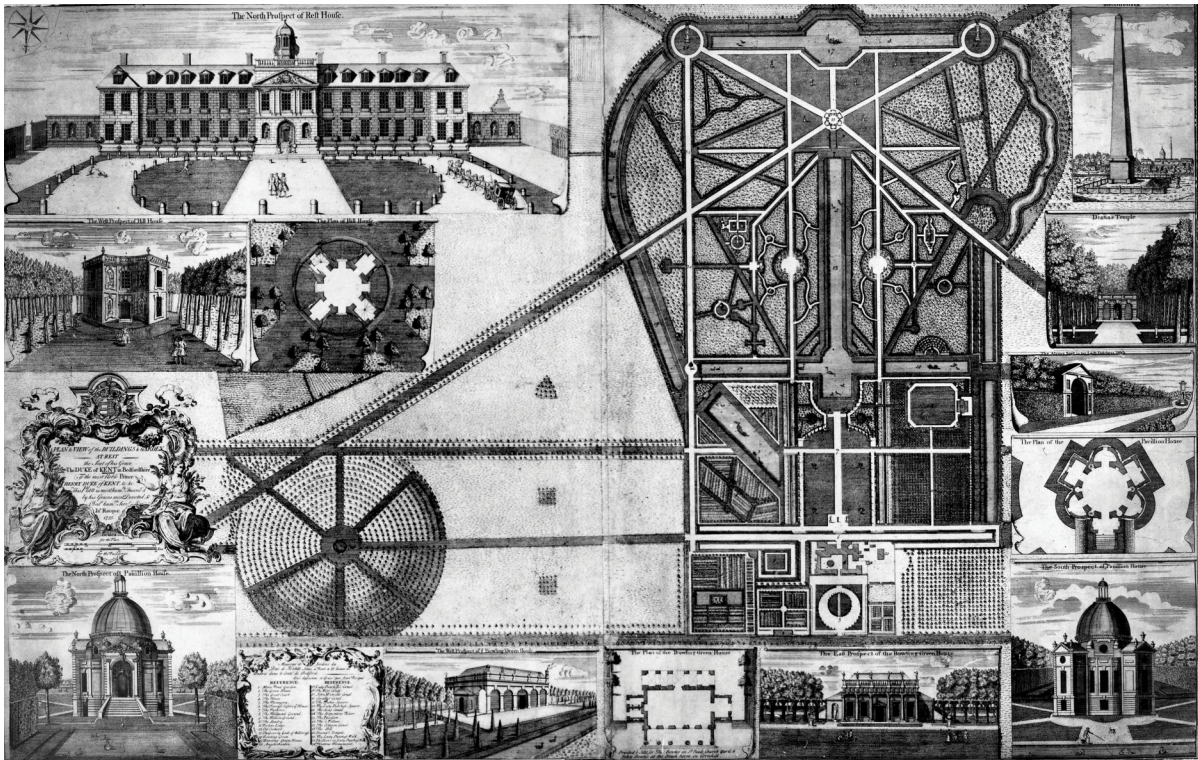


Fig 15: John Roque's Plan of Wrest Park, 1735. Showing the old house top left. LL18/42 BARS.

The evidence suggests then, that other than fairly unsurprising additions through time, the house at Wrest Park in the late seventeenth century was largely as it had been for some generations. It was by now a large house and the hearth tax of 1671 lists Wrest Park as having fifty-two hearths.<sup>109</sup> The 1670s heralded the start of a period of change and expansion, both for the house and for the gardens. Amabel, the wife of Henry the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl (1594-1651) was an heiress of considerable wealth and she was able to pass this on to her son Anthony (1645-1702), who in 1651 became the 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Kent.<sup>110</sup> Coupled with the fortune that accompanied his wife

<sup>109</sup> This places Wrest Park as being one of the largest houses in Bedfordshire at the time. Only Woburn Abbey, with 82 hearths and Luton Hoo with 60 were larger than Wrest Park. Joyce Godber. *History of Bedfordshire 1066-1888*. (Luton: White Crescent Press, 1969), 286.

<sup>110</sup> Known as the 'Good Countess', the dowager countess Amabel began improving the estate after the death of the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl, who she survived by nearly fifty years. "She husbanded the family resources and began to build up the estate in nearby Clophill". Joyce Godber. *History of Bedfordshire 1066-1888*. (Luton: White Crescent Press, 1969), 298.



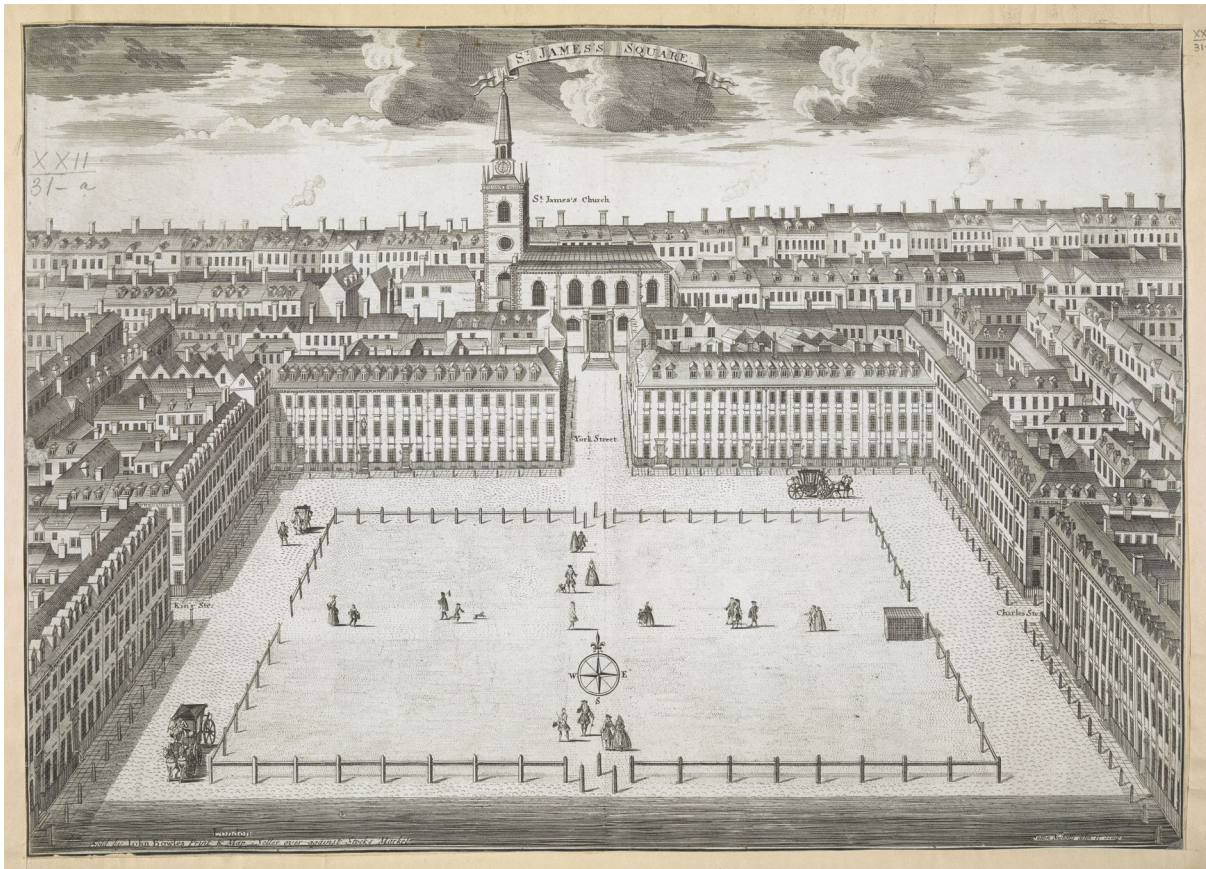


Fig 16: Bird's eye view of St James's Square, engraving by Sutton Nicholls, 1728, British Library.

Mary Lucas, the family were able to significantly extend the estate at Wrest through land acquisition to the north and west of the house.<sup>111</sup> It was during this period that the family's London house was built in St James' Square (see figure 16).

In 1672 a major phase of improvement works were carried out on the house. There was some internal remodelling which necessitated external modifications to the east elevation, but the greatest change was the addition of a grand classical façade, built on the north front of the house. Although the architect for this is unrecorded, the works were overseen by Thomas Hooper, the estate steward.<sup>112</sup> A engraving by John

111 Gillian Mawrey and Linden Groves. *The Gardens of English Heritage*. (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2010), 58.

112 James Collett-White. *Inventories of Bedfordshire Country Houses 1714-1830*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1995), 245.

Rocque (c1704-1762) made in 1735 (see figure 15) shows the new north front. It appears to be an imposing and fairly standard working of a classical facade of the late seventeenth century. It was of two storeys with an additional dormer storey formed by a hipped roofline. It had a central projecting three-bay pavilion beneath a cupola topped tower, expanded on each side with seven bay ranges terminated in a symmetrical pair of two bay pavilions to the corners. The house would have looked very much the same by the time Earl de Grey inherited it, and by then it perhaps appeared pedestrian and uninspiring. Certainly it was bland enough for de Grey to feel little affection for it, despite having spent time there as a child.<sup>113</sup>

The 12<sup>th</sup> Earl, Henry (1671-1740), inherited Wrest Park in 1702. For his generation the Grand Tour was an essential part of a young gentleman's preparation for the aristocratic life. For Henry, as with so many others, what he saw on his travels inspired in him an admiration for the classical world. He made changes to the gardens of which the most notable was the building of the Thomas Archer (1668-1743) designed pavilion at the far reach of the Long Water between 1709 and 1711. This large building was designed to be an eye-catcher of lavish scale, and was used as a summer house. The Archer Pavilion is a rare example of an English Baroque garden building with a beauty and importance that has long been recognised. Colen Campbell (1676-1729) included a plan and elevation drawings of the pavilion in *Vitruvius Britannicus* in 1715<sup>114</sup> (see figure 17).

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113 Joyce Godber. *The Marchioness Grey of Wrest Park*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1968), Pg 116-118.

114 Wrest Park. Conservation Management Plan, English Heritage. Gazetteer entry for Archer Pavilion. 2009. pg 81. X967/1/16. BARS.





Fig 17: The Archer Pavilion from Vitruvius Britannicus. L33/61 BARS.

It gives a focal point to the strong, geometric layout of the gardens. By 1715 the Earl, now the Duke of Kent, had turned his attention to the house. Rather than add to it or to remodel it he planned to demolish it and rebuild a couple of hundred metres to the



north. To this end he had plans drawn up<sup>115</sup> by the Italian architect Giacomo Leoni (1686-1746).<sup>116</sup> This house was to have a great hall in an oval shape, topped by a high dome. Wings to each side would have been decorated with Corinthian pilasters.<sup>117</sup> It was not to be. Despite the Duke's sons taking the plans with them on their Grand Tour, where they showed them to leading Italian Architects like Fillipo Juvarra (1678-1736), keen for comments or suggestions of improvement, the house was not built. Neither son lived long enough to succeed their father, and he lost much of his fortune in the South Sea Bubble. Discouraged, the Duke instead opted to improve the existing house and in 1736 the dining room was remodelled under Batty Langley (1696-1751).<sup>118</sup> The seed had been sown though, and when de Grey decided to build a new house at Wrest, although he did not use any part of the Leoni plans, he did follow the suggestion that a position slightly to the north of the old house would be an improvement.

The next inventory of the house that is available, that of 1740, paints the picture of a house largely unchanged since the remodelling works of the 1670s and indicates that the interiors had not been substantially refurnished.<sup>119</sup> It was the Duke of Kent's grand-daughter Jemima, Marchioness Grey (1723-1797) and her husband Philip

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115 Correspondence and plans relating to Leoni and Wrest Park, 1715. L31/245, L33/46, L33/47, BARS.

116 Leoni was an architect of Venetian origins, who was active in England from the first decade or so of the eighteenth century. His edition of Palladio, published in England between 1715 and 1720 places him in England from at least that date. He was primarily a country house architect and an advocate of Palladio. Colvin wrote that "Leoni's *Palladio* was one of the text-books of the English Palladian revival". His treatise *Compendius Directions for Builders* was dedicated to Henry, Duke of Kent. A copy belonging to the Duke has a bookplate dated 1713. The dedication presumably yielded the desired result when Leoni was commissioned to make designs for a new house at Wrest Park two years later. Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 608.

117 Joyce Godber. *History of Bedfordshire 1066-1888*. (Bedford: White Crescent Press, 1969), 299.

118 James Collett-White. *Inventories of Bedfordshire Country Houses 1714-1830*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1995), 246.

119 Collet-White, *Inventories of Bedfordshire*, 246.

Yorke (1720-1790) who was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Hardwicke from 1764, who inherited Wrest Park in 1740. Jemima held the house and gardens in great affection,<sup>120</sup> but even so the building must have felt like a rambling and unfashionable residence after so many years without improvements or updating.

The gardens were the primary passion of Jemima and Philip rather than the house, but that is not to say that they did not make any improvements to the latter.

Throughout their lives they were responsible for a series of works to update their home at Wrest in order to maintain a suitable level of modishness and comfort.<sup>121</sup>

Rather than large campaigns of work they oversaw a number of smaller improvement projects. During the 1760s a number of changes and additions were made to the house. In 1760 a new dining room was built under the direction of Henry Flitcroft (1697-1769).<sup>122</sup>

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120 “the home she so much loved was hers.” Joyce Godber. *History of Bedfordshire 1066-1888*. (Bedford: White Crescent Press, 1969), 20.

121 “In a bid to modernise Wrest, they commissioned a constant succession of alterations throughout their marriage,” Amy Boyningham. *“Maids Wives and Widows: Female Architectural Patronage in Eighteenth Century Britain.”* (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017), 97.

122 Flitcroft was a clerk of works and architect known for his work at Wentworth Woodhouse and Woburn Abbey. He had also carried out work for Philip Yorke's father, the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Hardwicke at the family seat of Wimpole Hall in 1742-5. Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 367-9.



Fig 18: 1831 watercolour, attributed to de Grey, showing the bow window of the Flitcroft Dining Room. Private collection.

Following on from this the old Great Parlour was converted into a more fashionable drawing room and repairs were made to the structure itself, mainly on the roofs and the north front.

The works carried out to the house by the Marchioness and Earl Hardwicke seem to have been the last campaign of any consequence. An attempt to bring some harmonious uniformity was made in 1791. Due to the way in which the house had developed over time, none of the elevations matched. Sash windows were fitted to the north and south elevations in an attempt to tie them together visually.<sup>123</sup>

Decorative improvements and updating of domestic equipment was carried out

<sup>123</sup> Estimate for alterations at Wrest. 1791. L31/277. BARS.

under the Marchioness during her widowhood which seems to have caused some disruption.<sup>124</sup>

Amabel (1751-1833), who became the 1<sup>st</sup> Countess de Grey, inherited Wrest from her mother the Marchioness. She lived out a long and quiet widowhood at Wrest Park, gradually handing over the reins to her heir and nephew Thomas (Earl de Grey). As we have seen, de Grey began planning for a new house during this period. Amabel's view of this is not recorded. The decision to demolish a family home of many generations and replace it completely is of great consequence. De Grey claimed that it was because the house was beyond repair, and that may well be true. It is also likely that de Grey had creative ambitions that found their outlet in such a large project. What was also true, is that by the 1830s the gardens were well established and of such scale and grandeur that de Grey felt that a new house was an appropriate response to the setting. As Collet-White observed, "The main architectural weakness of Wrest was the result of the piecemeal development which caused none of the fronts to match; particularly glaring in contrast to the formality of the landscape in which it was placed".<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> In a letter dated 28 June 1792 from the daughters of the Marchioness, Amabel and Mary Jemima, the disruption to their mother's home is discussed, with the solution being that she visit her elder daughter Amabel at her home in Putney Heath for some respite from the upheaval. "Have persuaded my mother to come here on Saturday for a few days; when she can go to Wrest I know not for Pawsey writes that every room is full of workmen and none finished." L30/11/240/51. BARS.

<sup>125</sup> James Collett-White. *Inventories of Bedfordshire Country Houses 1714-1830*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1995), 249.

## **The Gardens at Wrest Park.**

The gardens, which I believe are the largest and the most complete in their way in England, are essentially in the French style of Louis XIV, and everything seemed to point out that as the characteristic of the house.<sup>126</sup>

As is explored elsewhere in this thesis, de Grey felt that the most appropriate style for his new house was French, as a reflection of the gardens within which it was to stand. The gardens and landscape that de Grey inherited were undeniably grand, and represented many different fashions of the English country house garden design from the preceding two hundred years, but there was more to them than simply a simulacrum of 17<sup>th</sup> century French gardens. This section will provide a brief history and description of the development of the gardens. It is not intended to be an analysis, but rather to provide the background of the setting into which de Grey placed his house.<sup>127</sup>

Wrest Park was placed under government ownership in 1946. It was then leased to the National Institute of Agricultural Engineering and although much of the wider parkland was used for agricultural research the gardens were maintained and opened to the public under the Ministry of Works and later by English Heritage. To the north of the house is North Park, once open parkland with avenues of trees, surrounded by woodland. To the west of the house are the Walled Gardens. To the south of the house, ranging for half a mile, are the formal gardens. Closest to the house are the Terrace and French Parterre, the Italian Garden and a late Victorian

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126 "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 45. BARS

127 The gardens and landscape have been written about extensively and separately from the house. A full account of the gardens can be found in the Wrest Park Conservation Management Plan, Gazetteer G; Dr. Twigs Way, The Landscape, English Heritage, 2005, X967/1/5/1. BARS.

rose garden. Beyond this, past an area of lawns that was once the site of the old house lies the woodland, or Great Garden. This consists of a largely symmetrical woodland bisected by the Long Water running north to south. The woodland is divided by a network of paths and rides and has a number of clearings or compartments, edged in either Yew or Hornbeam. Each compartment has a small garden building, statuary (much now lost) or other garden features. In addition to this there are de Grey's Orangery, an eighteenth century bath house, the Bowling Green House, the Archer Pavilion and numerous other small garden buildings. There are also other areas of formal gardens. The woodland garden is surrounded by a series of canals forming a loose horse-shoe shape, which once flowed into the River Hit, to the south of the site (see figure 19).

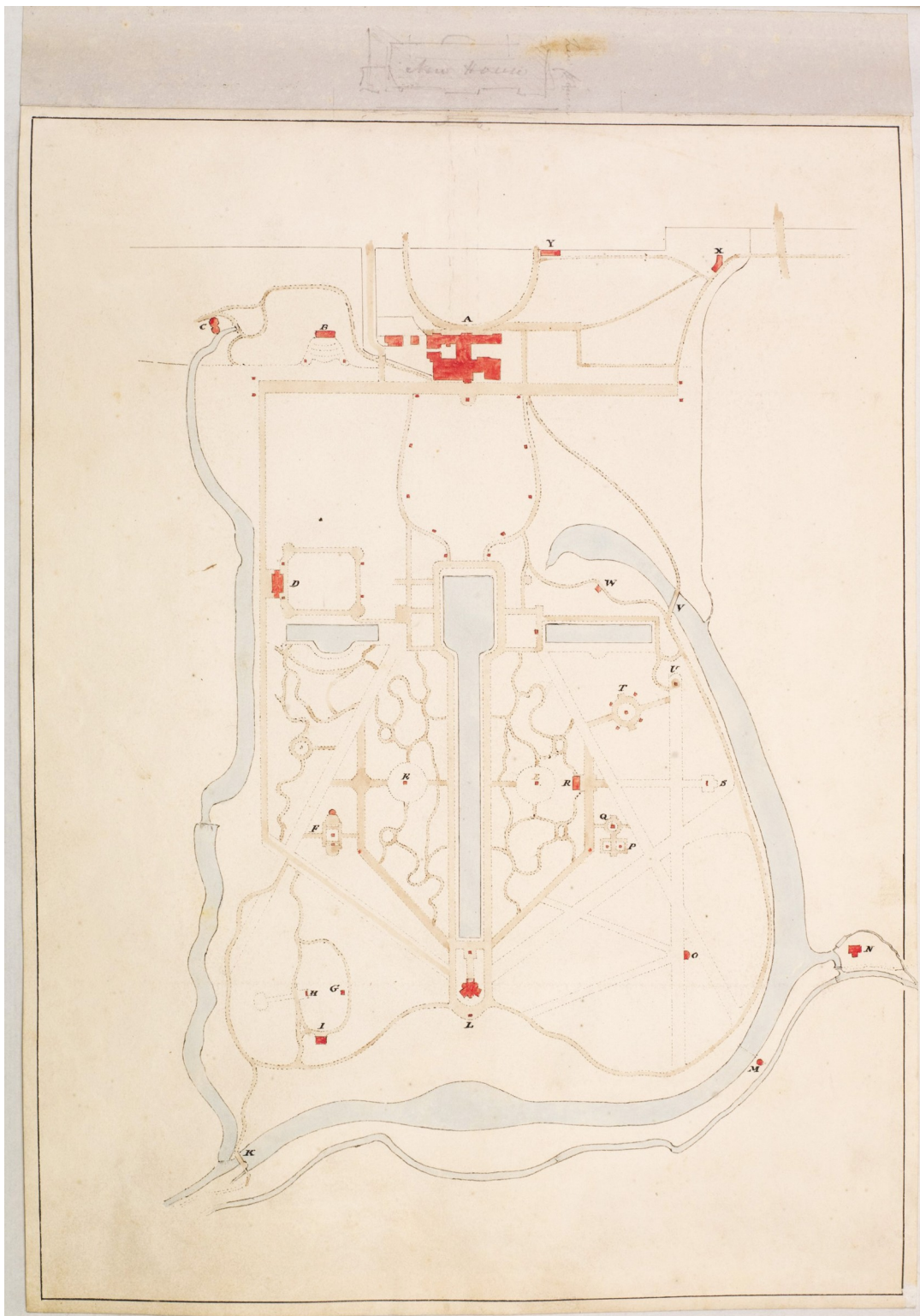


Fig 19: Site plan by de Grey dated 1831. It shows the extent of the gardens and a sketched outline of the new house to the north. Private collection.



Although the history of the Wrest Park estate can be traced back to the thirteenth century, the earliest reference to decorative landscaping was in a 'country house' poem by Thomas Carew (1595-1640), which refers to a double moat.<sup>128</sup> As has been noted, the 'Good Countess' Amabel began adding to and consolidating the estate during the 1650s after the death of her husband, and was responsible for setting out elements of the garden such as a bowling green, a hunting stand and a walled formal garden to the south of the house. The works to the house that were carried out during the 1670s were coupled with a large amount of tree-planting and laying out of grounds by Amabel and her son Anthony, the 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Kent.<sup>129</sup> By 1685 the Long Water had been created (see figure 20). It is a straight lake or canal, and in modern times has a spade shaped terminus at the north end. It creates a strong north-south axis which forms the central point of order for the gardens, buildings and originally out into the wider parkland. It provides a symmetrical backbone around which all subsequent development of the gardens were built. The system of ornamental canals at Wrest Park have been compared to French styles such as at Versailles<sup>130</sup>, and are the genesis of the later perception that the gardens were of French design.

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128 "And entertaines the flowing streames in deep  
And spacious channels, where they slowly creep  
In snaky windings, as the shelving ground  
Leads them in circles, till they twice surround  
This Island Mansion, which i'th' center plac'd,  
Is with a double Crystall heaven embrac'd,  
In which our watery constellations floate."

Excerpt from "To my friend GN from Wrest". *The Poems of Thomas Carew* (London: Whittingham and Wilkins, 1870), pg 111.

129 Wrest Park: Conservation Management Plan. English Heritage. 2009. 47. X967/1/16, BARS.

130 For example, "By then the Long Water had also received a cross-axis of canals at its widened head, inspired by Versailles". Nikolaus Pevsner. *Pevsner Architectural Guides. Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press, 2002 reprint of 1968 edition), 346.



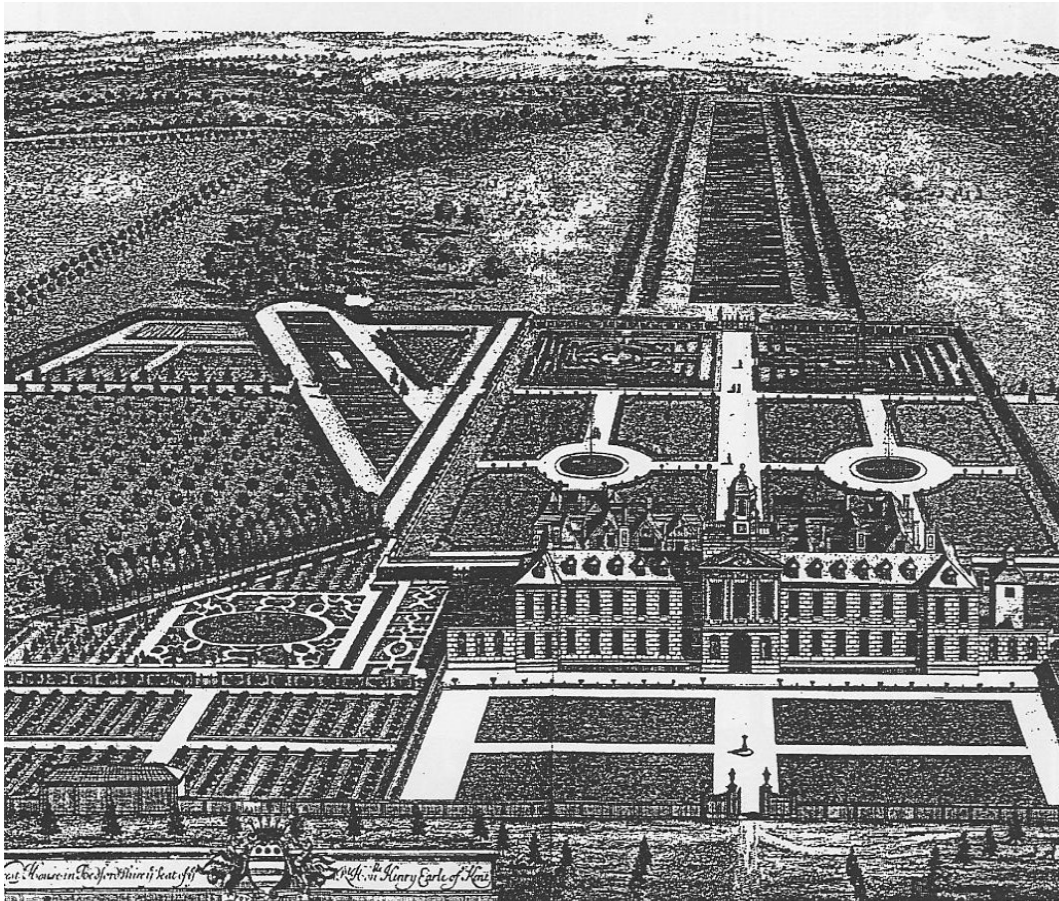


Fig 20: View of the house and gardens at Wrest, showing the Long Water from the north. By Johannes Kip and Leonard Knyff c.1705. LL18/39-4 BARS.

Inspired by both his Grand Tour, and his ambitions at court, the 12<sup>th</sup> Earl had plans to improve Wrest Park. Although his scheme for the house did not come to fruition he was, aided by a financially prudent marriage, and was able to make conspicuous changes to the garden starting with large scale landscaping. The woodland sections of the gardens that had been started by the 12<sup>th</sup> Earl's father and grandmother were now enhanced with additional formal water features, sculptures, rides, avenues, garden compartments and most notably a series of garden buildings by some of the foremost architects and designers of the time such as Thomas Archer and George London (1640-1714).

As we have seen, the loss of money due to the South Sea Bubble, combined with the premature deaths of both the Duke's sons followed by a costly fire at the family's London house at St James's Square put a stop to any proposed house building at Wrest. It also marked an adjournment in the development of the gardens that only ended in 1729 when the Duke was married for a second time, to Sophia Bentinck (1701-1741) the daughter of William, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Portland (1649-1709). Work at Wrest Park was reinvigorated by this marriage, which brought the possibility of a new heir, and also a large marriage settlement. Fashions had changed during the first decades of the eighteenth century. The regimented form of gardens largely remained, but there was now a definite move towards a softening of formality to include features such as serpentine paths and romantic under-planting of fragrant climbing plants such as roses and honeysuckle. New, fashionable garden designers like Batty Langley (1696-1751)<sup>131</sup> and Thomas Wright were employed at Wrest. It is from this phase of works that the Bowling Green House, the Orangery (later to be demolished by de Grey) and the winding woodland paths date.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Duke died in 1740, having facilitated the marriage of his granddaughter and heir, Jemima, to Philip Yorke, the eldest son of the Lord Chancellor, Lord Harwicke. She was only seventeen at the time, but it appears that the Duke was in failing health and keen to get her settled. Jemima Yorke, Marchioness Grey, had spent much of her childhood at Wrest Park and held a particular affection for the gardens,

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<sup>131</sup> Batty Langley published an influential book, "Principles of Gardening", in 1727. Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 597-598. The softer, more relaxed style that he advocated in the book made the stiff styles present at Wrest seem suddenly very out of date, despite having been created only recently. The 12<sup>th</sup> Earl made a sensibly pride-swallowing decision in appointing Langley to marry together the existing garden with some more fashionable additions.

which had been in constant development throughout her life. The first visit to Wrest Park that she and Philip made after their marriage was in August 1740. She was eager to show the place to her new husband through her eyes, to the point of being a little disgruntled when he made exploratory forays without her:

We arrived at 7; the sun was but just set and it was perfectly calm and fine. It was exactly the time I think most pleasant of the whole day. The serenity of the evening light spread a peculiar beauty over the whole place. We had a short but a very pretty walk by owl-light and moonlight together. Mr Yorke desires I would assure you that what he has seen of the garden he admires mightily.... He has been stealing a walk with Mr Longueville whilst I was dressing, which I did not allow of, for I wanted to have been with him every time he was to see anything in the garden.”<sup>132</sup>

This romantic image, of a couple at the start of what was to be a long and happy marriage, provides a delightful insight into just what a large pleasure garden such as at Wrest Park could mean to the owner. Despite this early visit, the young couple did not make it their home or indeed carry out any work there for the following three years. After this time they were enthusiastic about bringing modern fashions into the grounds and garden whilst retaining the essence of the place. They were both romantic and intellectual and were keen to demonstrate this through their garden.

They were able to express both their intellect and their humour in the Mithraic Glade, a large open compartment to the far south-west of the woodland garden. In this they constructed a monumental 'altar' of flint and limestone.

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<sup>132</sup> Volume 1 – Transcripts/extracts of correspondence of Jemima Yorke, (Marchioness Grey) sent to Lady Mary Gregory. 1740-1748, L30/9a/1, BARS.



Fig 21: Watercolour of the Mithraic altar, with the root house visible in the background. Attributed to de Grey, 1831. Private collection.

Inscriptions on two of the faces of the altar in ancient Greek and Persian aimed to mystify visitors. The light-hearted aim was to suggest that it was a genuine piece from antiquity, dedicated to the sun-god Mithras.<sup>133</sup> To accompany this there was a

<sup>133</sup> Gillian Mawrey and Linden Groves, *The Gardens of English Heritage* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2010), 61.

root house in which they hoped to house an attendant to the altar, following the picturesque fashion of having a wise hermit secreted within the gardens.

To the north-west of the house they built an open air bath house. Constructed to look like a partly ruined structure, it is of roughly hewn stone with a thatched roof. An inner chamber, used to reach the freezing plunge bath, has a floor of flint and deer vertebrae. Of a similar date is the Chinese Bridge and Temple to the east of the woodland garden on the canal. Intended to represent the then popular willow pattern from Chinese porcelain, this area included a small waterfall.<sup>134</sup>

The Marchioness Grey, in particular, valued the garden for its formal beauty, but nonetheless commissioned the prominent picturesque landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783) to carry out work to the garden. It was limited to naturalising some of the canals and planting stands of trees to the outer grounds to provide a more pastoral setting.

After Marchioness Grey died in 1797 her daughter Amabel inherited Wrest Park and made it her principal home for the remainder of her life. Countess de Grey maintained the gardens, but added little, other than five Greco-Roman altars that were purchased in 1817. Unfortunately due to financial pressures, she was obliged to sell much of the original eighteenth century statuary for their value as melted down lead, which reduced the character of the gardens which up to this point had been densely populated with statues.

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<sup>134</sup> Mawrey and Groves, *The Gardens of English Heritage*, 62.

Earl de Grey considered that the gardens he inherited were of a French style and this seems to have been an accepted reading of them at the time. In a letter to William Vincent in 1855, Ralph Sneyd, a fairly regular visitor to Wrest Park, discussing the style of the house wrote that:

...the style was perhaps the only one the *locality* admitted of – and the vast pleasure ground (one of the very few in England laid out by Le Notre himself) prescribed imperatively of the house.<sup>135</sup>

Andre Le Notre (1613-1700), the landscape architect who designed the gardens at Versailles, did not lay out the gardens at Wrest Park, but it is telling that in 1855 the perception was that not only were the gardens French, but they were the creation of probably the most famous French garden designer. It is a forgivable conceit. The gardens have many undeniably French elements, particularly the formal canals and the geometric layout of the paths, radiating out from the Long Water and the Archer Pavilion. Some of the changes wrought in the early eighteenth century by the Duke of Kent perhaps owe more to Dutch gardens. The clipped hedges and intimate formal areas that he created follow a more Dutch rather than French fashion. The Duke was a strong supporter of the crown and it is unsurprising to imagine that he might reflect this in his garden. He placed a statue of William III in a prominent position at the head of Long Water, in front of the Archer Pavilion.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Letter from Ralph Sneyd to Henry William Vincent, 06 Nov 1855, S(HWV/RS)324, Keele University Archives.

<sup>136</sup> Gillian Mawrey and Linden Groves, *The Gardens of English Heritage* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2010), 58.



This sets the scene for de Grey. He had long held plans for the house and the estate and it was his wish to improve and add to, rather than eradicate, the works and the opinions that were represented of his forebears.

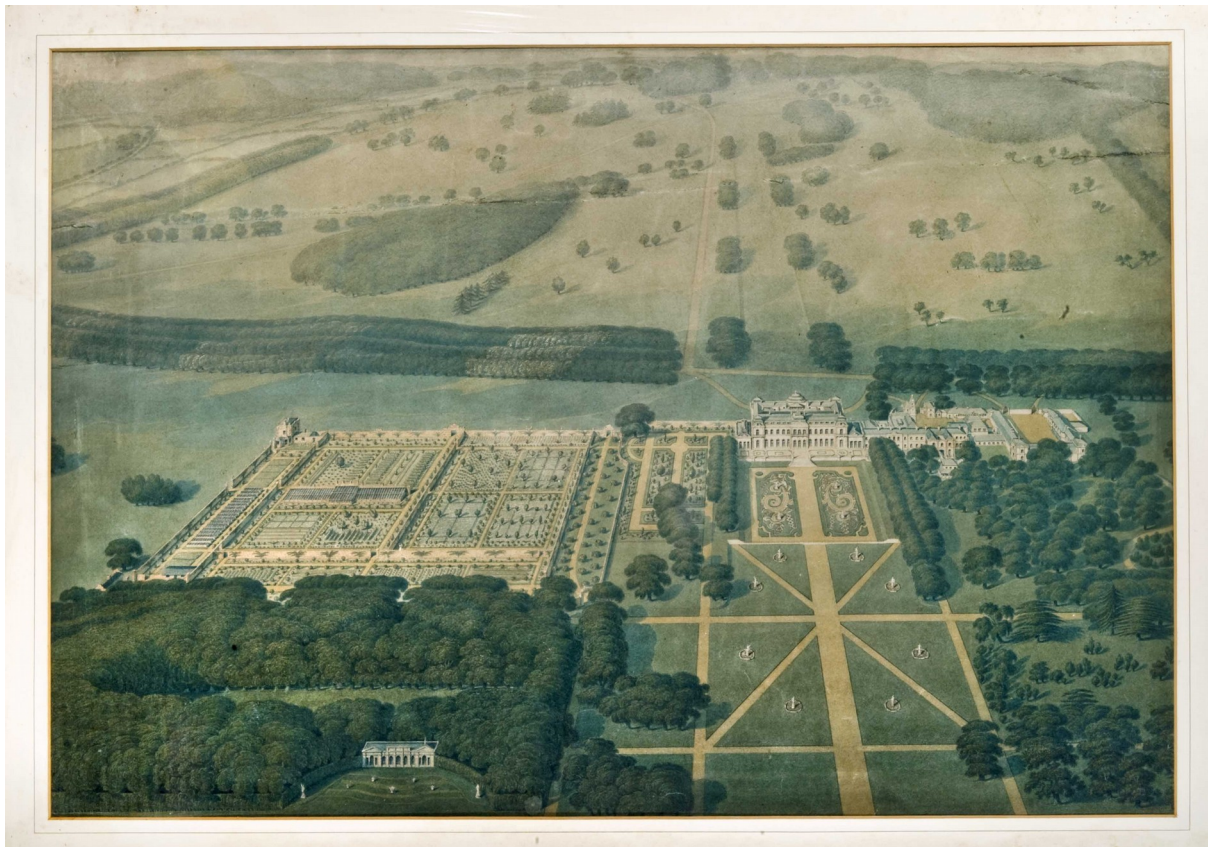


Fig 22: Watercolour of Wrest Park c. 1840. By unknown artist. In private collection.

## Section 2. The French style of Wrest Park House. De Grey's choice of style.

The question we have to answer in this section is why de Grey chose the French style of the 17th and 18th centuries for his house at Wrest Park.

The house that de Grey built at Wrest between 1834 and 1839 is a rare, almost certainly unique, example of 18th century French style architecture in England, built

in the 19th century. It was constructed at a time when remodelling or even the construction of entire new houses was not unusual<sup>137</sup> and so the choice of a style not represented anywhere else in the country during the 1830s is startling. Pevsner certainly considered the house at Wrest to be unique:

Victorian architecture is heralded by the fanfare of Wrest Park. This, considering its date, 1834-6, is a building unique in England for its consistency of style. It is done in a French Dixhuitième throughout, externally and internally, and the interiors are very lavish indeed. The French Baroque and Rococo had in fact been revived in England by Benjamin Wyatt already occasionally in the 1820s, but never with so much conviction and panache.<sup>138</sup>

Benjamin Wyatt (1775-1855), was an architect of some renown and the Surveyor of Westminster Abbey. His architectural style seems to have leaned heavily on Palladianism, but for a few of his interiors he employed a French style in which he, “achieved strikingly effective recreations of the French rococo style of the period of Louis XIV.”<sup>139</sup>

The most notable of these interiors was his remodelling at Apsley House (see figure 23), but his work to the exterior is entirely of a fairly standard neo-classical style, using nothing with obvious French origins. The revival of French Baroque and Rococo by Wyatt to which Pevsner referred was entirely limited to interiors.

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137 David Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 46.

138 Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press, 1968, 2002 reprint), 26.

139 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 1104.





Fig 23: Waterloo Gallery, Apsley House  
©Copyright English Heritage.

In using a French style for his external architecture de Grey created something unique for the period in England.

It is necessary therefore to reach a hypothesis based upon what evidence there is and to consider Wrest in the context of other buildings of the 1820s and 30s.

Although there is a large archive of family papers, including personal correspondence this source does not make clear what precisely influenced his choice of style. It is useful then to examine what influences might have come to bear, and also to consider the contrast of other buildings of the period.

The first thirty years of the 19th century are interesting for a variety of reasons. This period marked the boundary between the Georgian and Victorian periods. Begun in the final years of William IV's reign and completed two years after Queen Victoria's

accession to the throne Wrest is exemplary of the English Victorian country house: its aspiration to stately grandeur, the expression of artistic and architectural expertise, the large service wing and the migration of bedrooms to the upper floors and of reception rooms to the ground floor, can all be considered as typical marks of Victorian country houses. But de Grey's unique choice of a French style is not typically Victorian, particularly in the early years of the reign. There are examples of French styles being used towards the end of the 19th century such as the Bowes Museum begun in 1869 and Waddesdon begun in 1874, but as a residential building solely of an 18th century French style it has no equivalent in England nor indeed the British Isles beforehand.



Fig 24: The west elevation of Wrest House, showing the French style window mouldings and mansard roofed pavilions.

What explanations have been advanced for de Grey's use of a French style? There has not been a great deal of discussion around this point, despite it being an unusual choice. One suggestion is that his choice can be attributed to his Francophilia<sup>140</sup>. But it bears repeating that he showed no particular inclination towards this style outside of his architectural work at Wrest Park. The view that because de Grey built Wrest in a French style he must have been demonstrating a strong personal preference to all things French negates the need to examine de Grey's motivation and should be challenged. An English aristocrat's choice of a French style for his house might be

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<sup>140</sup> "The Earl was an ardent Francophile", Simon Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Houses*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 6.

seen as a reflection either of an admiration for France and French architectural styles, or as a sign of some familial connection to France. Neither of these seem to apply to Wrest. The only personal connection de Grey had with France were his visits to the country,<sup>141</sup> not unusual for one of his class and generation. These visits might have nurtured an affection for things French but there is no indication that his interest was anything stronger. A more convincing explanation might be that de Grey chose a French style specifically to complement the existing gardens at Wrest. It is reductive to dismiss de Grey as a Francophile and this may be one of the reasons why there are so few mentions of him in the literature on the English Country House. In the large archive of family papers, including personal correspondence, the only evidence that sheds any light upon what determined his unique choice of style is this, written by de Grey in 1846:

The gardens, which I believe are the largest and most complete in their way in England, are essentially in the French style of Louis XIV, and everything seemed to point out that as the characteristic of the house.<sup>142</sup>

He was certainly anxious that the French style was emphatic and easily recognised and had planned this for some years prior to building the main house. He wrote of the Silsoe gate lodges:

When I was at Paris some years before, I had paid a good deal of attention to small pavilions or buildings in gardens, with a view to lodges or park gates at Wrest; and the first effort of my genius was the erection of the Silsoe lodges. After they were finished, some visitor to the park, and being very much struck with the avenue and general style of the place, and considering the lodges as a

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<sup>141</sup> De Grey visited France in 1801, 1815, 1822 and 1825.

<sup>142</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." CRT/190/45/2. 45, BARS.

part of it, said “Ah! Here is a fine specimen of a French place.”...it convinced me that I must adhere to that date and taste.<sup>143</sup>

De Grey chose a French style, and in particular a Louis XIV style, for his house and other buildings at Wrest Park because he believed that it was the most appropriate style to use within the long established garden, which he considered to have been modelled after that era. His decision was determined by *decorum*.

### **A Sense of Decorum in Architecture.**

Earl de Grey, as we have seen, had enjoyed the benefits of a fine education. It is a reasonable assumption that his studies had encompassed a broad sweep of subjects, including ancient philosophy. It is thus possible that a deep-seated sense of *decorum* infused everything that he did.

To understand the meaning of *decorum* it is useful to consider its origins within the teachings of ancient philosophy and rhetoric and how the writings of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE writer Vitruvius utilised Ciceronian ideas within his writings on architecture. The re-discovery of Vitruvius's books on architecture during the European Renaissance placed his thoughts on *decorum* firmly within the academic reach of subsequent generations and could quite credibly have been part of de Grey's education.

Among the ancient philosophers, it is Cicero (106 BC-43 BC) who best articulated the concept of *decorum* particularly as an essential ingredient of the practice of rhetoric and ethical theory in public discourse. Cicero was the main, or at least most closely followed, proponent of the concept of *decorum* and it anchors the very fabric

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<sup>143</sup> “Memoirs of Earl de Grey.” CRT/190/45/2. 45, BARS.

of his theories of ethics and rhetoric. It is a deceptively simple concept; that the correct words or actions should be used at the correct moment or situation. It is a defined rule of behaviour, but not an immutable one. There is flexibility in finding the most seemly correlation of words and situation.

The art of public speaking, as advocated by Cicero and his contemporaries, was a vital tool, to be honed and enjoyed. An eloquent speaker holds great responsibility, which is why the study of rhetoric and ethical thinking are symbiotic. A full understanding of *decorum* protects the listener from an eloquent speaker who does not follow an ethical path. Eloquence can be persuasive, so in using the correct and truthful words to fit the occasion, whether addressing the senate, or engaging in public debate with peers, a control is put in place so that a justified outcome will be achieved. In seeking excellence and *decorum* or truth in speaking, the fear of actually failing, or in perceived failure, is what should spur an ethical speaker to develop his skills.<sup>144</sup> In the same way, de Grey's wish to be seen as a good architect meant that his decisions were arrived at carefully and thoughtfully. To employ *decorum* in speech is to place a control on the outcome. As Kapust puts it, "... the desire to observe decorum provides the orator with standards of judgement that transcend mere taste and reflect underlying moral knowledge."<sup>145</sup>

Although its roots lie in oration, employing a style that is appropriate to the accompanying situation was a concept that began to be used beyond its field of

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144 "The orator becomes more prone to fear, not less, as he advances in his art." Robert Goodman, "I tremble with my whole heart," Cicero on the anxieties of eloquence," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 0(0) (2019): 3.

145 Daniel Kapust, "Cicero on Decorum and the Morality of Rhetoric," *European Journal of Political Theory*. 10(1) (2011): 92.

origin. It has been understood as an essential tool within the arts and architectural practice since early times, as demonstrated in the writings of Vitruvius.

Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (c.75BC – c.15BC) was a Roman of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. He is primarily remembered as an architect although he was also a practitioner of many of the areas that we would now understand to fall within the broader disciplines of construction, such as civil engineering, military engineering, planning, and both general and specialised construction management. The little that we know about the life and talents of Vitruvius come from his own words, within the multiple volumes of his surviving work, titled *De architectura*.<sup>146</sup> From his writings on architecture we inherit his views on proportion, the perfection of which comes from the perfect symmetry of the human form, and the notion that all buildings should be a combination of *firmitas* (strength), *utilitas* (utility), and *venustas* (beauty). He also applied elements of the theory of rhetoric to architecture. In particular he advocated that the principle of *decorum* (or more accurately *decor*<sup>147</sup>) was an intrinsic part of the philosophy of architectural thought.<sup>148</sup>

146 Barry Baldwin, "The Date, Identity, and Career of Vitruvius." *Latomus* 49, no. 2 (1990): 425-34.

147 Vitruvius used the term *decor* to describe the use of an appropriate architectural style or order suited to the particular setting. The Renaissance scholars who read Vitruvius identified this as being equivalent to Cicero's *decorum*. As Payne puts it, the way that Vitruvius used specific examples, or stories, to emphasise a point provided a good fit with the other lessons being gleaned from classical teachings and deepened the scholarly understanding of Vitruvius. "What gave these stories their greatest discourse-producing power was the fact that they offered several points of contact with the theoretical bodies of other arts and thus seemed to confirm a common ground between their discourses. The theories of decor(um) and imitatio, of expression (moti), of (visual) language-formation, as well as the practice of criticism, all lay pregnant within Vitruvius's text and constituted obvious bridges to the figural arts. More important, perhaps, they linked architecture to poetics and rhetoric and suggested a reassuring harmony between key texts of classical culture. Vitruvius's readers knew they could find theoretical reinforcements where and when his elliptical statements failed them." Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance. Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52.

148 Although the Renaissance interpretation of *decor* as having its roots in Ciceronian teachings is debatable, as pointed out by Alina Payne. "Among the many bridges between Vitruvius and the corpus of Latin texts that fascinated Renaissance readers, decor was one of the most obvious ones, for it evidently shared much with decorum. Whether Vitruvius intended decor to be the architect's version of the rhetor's decorum and whether he was indebted to the literary and philosophical peripatetic tradition for its definition is a vexed question."

During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries interest grew around classical writings, and in particular the works of Vitruvius, having been 're-discovered',<sup>149</sup> were to provide a rich seam of influence for the direction that architectural theory was to take. The impact that Vitruvius had on western architecture from the fifteenth century onwards should not be underestimated. The works of Vitruvius were the only written sources of Roman art and architectural theory to survive and as such were to provide the only coherent account available to the curious minds of Renaissance philosophers, architects and artists. Although Vitruvius was one of many members of classical antiquity with an interest in architecture, the lack of other voices surviving in the written record rather narrowed down the field in terms of the references available. Vitruvius was read and interpreted as representing the epitome of classical architecture when in reality his views did not necessarily represent the whole story. Later analysis of his works have identified that what he stated in his written works did not always match the evidence that can be gleaned from the archaeological record,<sup>150</sup> but for the architects of the Renaissance and those who followed, his

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Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance. Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53.

149 It was long considered to be the discovery of *De architectura* by Poggio Bracciolini in the library of Saint Gall Abbey in the second decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century that brought Vitruvius to the attention of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century scholars, but this view has generally become more nuanced as there is ample evidence that copies of the manuscript had been known from the middle ages. For example; "By assembling evidence for the medieval knowledge of Vitruvius's *De architectura libri x*, modern students have disproved the old view that Vitruvius was unknown before 1416 when Poggio Bracciolini and Cencio Rustici discovered a Vitruvius text in the monastery library of St Gall." Carol Herselle Krinsky, "Seventy-Eight Vitruvius Manuscripts." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 30 (1967): 36. Whatever the case may be in the story of 're-discovery', the truth remains that the writing of Vitruvius became influential in the decades after the 1410s.

150 "Indeed, Vitruvius is the only surviving ancient text of any description whose self-proclaimed intention was to deal exclusively with the visual arts. This gives the text an extraordinary, and perhaps misplaced, importance. In the twentieth century we have come to see Vitruvius as having a highly individualistic view of the buildings of his time; as excavation has uncovered more evidence of the building fabric of ancient Rome and the cities of its empire, we find that the evidence of ornament was far more varied than Vitruvius prescribes. Many of his words of advice that later architects were to take as rules were in fact only one interpretation of the use of a whole range of decorative possibilities". Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament. A Social History Since 1450*, (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 68.



vision of a classical architectural philosophy, anchored by a sense of order, was the only true treaty. As Snodin and Howard observe, this is what ties the concept of *decorum* to post fifteenth century western architecture:

The fact remains, however, that for the period after 1450..., there was a perception of rule and order, of decorum, based on Vitruvius, amongst architectural writers that set the agenda for all discussion.<sup>151</sup>

In Britain, the interpretation of Vitruvius through the works of the Renaissance architects was to have an overwhelming effect. In the century preceding de Grey's work at Wrest Park, Inigo Jones (1573-1652) had led the charge for Palladianism in England that was to effectively trample over all other styles well into the eighteenth century.<sup>152</sup>

As we can see, by the time that de Grey was conceiving of his house at Wrest Park architects were following a thread that led back as far as the ancient philosophers. That is that their work had to fit within an accepted, and predominantly constraining, set of theories, anchored within the notion of *decorum*, that there should be the perfect fit of style to setting and circumstance. These were highly philosophical ideals, and the buildings that were designed and constructed were seen to be a part of the discipline as a whole. Alina Payne describes this relationship:

For the next generation Vitruvius's lament that good buildings have been left without written traces to the great detriment of architecture must have rung in the

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<sup>151</sup> Michael Snodin and Maurice Howard, *Ornament. A Social History Since 1450*, (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>152</sup> Sir Banister Fletcher, *et al. A History of Architecture*. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, Twentieth Edition, 1996), 1022.

air and alerted his readers to the fact that buildings cannot stand in for theory and that the two exist in a reflexive relationship.<sup>153</sup>

If de Grey aspired to high theory he did not articulate it in writing. If “buildings cannot stand for theory”, then what was de Grey ‘theorising’? The evidence strongly suggests that he simply wished to emulate the French style that he had admired in Paris and found that looking at designs and illustrations in the French books purchased during his visits provided him with everything he required in order to build his French style house as a suitable addition to the gardens at Wrest. His use of the books seems to have gone only as far as trawling through the illustrations in them when he felt that he couldn't find exactly what he wanted in the architectural dealers shops and yards from where he accrued various features of his house, and when he felt in need of some inspiration or direction when he was obliged to design fixtures and fittings himself.<sup>154</sup> He left no references to his following of any theory or philosophy. This is where ‘*decorum*’ comes in – the innate sense of what was correct rather than an adherence to a particular theory. De Grey had a strong view that, not only did he desire to build his house in a French style, but also that he was correct in doing so:

I had vanity enough to think that I knew enough to enable me to make such a place as would suit me; and taste enough, or at least sufficiently pertinacious and

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153 Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance. Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

154 De Grey made a few such references in his account of building the house. For example, “I had my French books always under my hand! referred to them for authority whenever I could find anything to suit me, and doors, shutters, panels, rails etc. were to be found.” and, “The iron railings both on the terrace and at the lower end of the French garden and upon the balconies of the house are derived (not copied) from my darling 60-franc French books, and I look at them with pleasure, I must confess, tho’ they have been up some years.” A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

obstinate, to carry out my own views whether good or bad, as well as any other person could for me.<sup>155</sup>

### **The fashionable styles of the early 19th century.**

The first half of the 18th century was dominated by the intellectual rigour brought to architecture through Palladianism. By the middle of the century things were starting to change, and the decades between 1750 and 1830 are worth a brief digression in order to understand the architectural climate within which de Grey designed his house at Wrest.

The impulse behind classicism was that through the recreation of the classical world, the contemporary world would take on some of the associations of perfection and natural harmony. This was laudable enough, but in truth there was not a deep enough understanding of classical buildings to allow for much variation. As we have seen, architects had to rely almost solely on Vitruvius and interpretations of his work for insight onto the architecture of the ancient world. The ongoing adherence to Palladianism into the 18th century lead to a homogeneous style that while pleasing, was bland in its ubiquity.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century brought changes as English architects began to look further than they had previously and began not only to translate foreign treatises, but to publish their own works.<sup>156</sup> This did not represent a cohesive new way of looking at architectural philosophy, rather, “The English distrust of intellectualising theory and the absence of an architectural academy meant a lack of systematic rationalising

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155 A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

156 Sir Banister Fletcher, *et al. A History of Architecture*. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, Twentieth Edition, 1996), 840.

treatises such as those of Perrault, Blondel and Durand".<sup>157</sup> As the 18th century progressed a deeper understanding based on a more archaeological approach was applied to contemporary classical architecture, culminating the following century in a purist Greek revival with houses such as Belsay Hall in Northumberland.<sup>158</sup> But this was not the only story being told in England at the time. The same interest in antiquarianism that lead to ever more 'pure' expressions of classical architecture might be considered to have lead indirectly to the early gothic revival buildings such as James Wyatt's (1746-1813) Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire, which also harked back to earlier periods, but rather than looking to the continent sought instead a legitimised version of Englishness.<sup>159</sup> In seeking a connection to the past, a more romantic approach became popular, leading to another early gothic revival house, Horace Walpole's (1717-1797) Strawberry Hill. The house, built between 1749 and 1776, was a collection of the gothic themes being studied by Walpole<sup>160</sup> and had a starting point of creating an honest account of middle ages Englishness and delivered an astonishing amalgam of copied examples of architectural features from other buildings with an exuberant rococo feel.<sup>161</sup> Despite it's avowed gothic pedigree,

157 Sir Banister Fletcher, *et al. A History of Architecture*. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, Twentieth Edition, 1996), 1022.

158 Built between 1810 and 1817 Belsay Hall is one of the earliest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek revival houses. It was built by Sir Charles Monck (1779-1867), who like de Grey was his own architect, seeking assistance with some of the more technical aspects from John Dobson of Newcastle. Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 659.

159 Also known as Beckford's Folly, after the owner William Beckford (1760-1844), Fonthill Abbey was a gothic revival house built on a monumental scale between 1796 and 1813. It had a roughly cruciform plan, with a 90 metre tall tower at the crossing. It was a faithful collection of English gothic influences such as the Ely Cathedral inspired detailing to the tower, but it was ill-fated. The combination of an owner with Romantic sensibilities and an architect who was experienced but not given to attention to detail resulted in issues with the quality of the build and ultimately to the collapse of the tower in 1825. John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*. (London: Yale University Press, 1953, 1993 reprint), 428-9.

160 "...in a spirit of caprice, of making the fabric of the house reflect the studies he was then enjoying – topography, county history, and the antecedents of his own family." John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, (London: Yale University Press 1953, 1993 reprint), 372.

161 James Stevens Curl, *Georgian Architecture in the British Isles 1714-1830*. (Swindon: English Heritage, 2011) 108-9.

Strawberry Hill perhaps can be considered to have been an initial point for the move towards eclecticism that would follow over the next few decades. Symmetry was no longer the only expression allowed, which led to a new and exciting reinterpretation of classicism by architects including Sir John Soane (1753-1837). As the century drew to a close this tasteful rigour was superseded by the Picturesque movement which evolved into eclecticism.

The picturesque movement, articulated in the theories of the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque was inaugurated through the writings of Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824), Uvedale Price (1747-1829) and Humphry Repton (1752-1818). This movement, heralded by the landscape gardens of the mid-18th century, allowed for a more relaxed and informal architectural response to house building. During the first three decades of the 19th century, architecture, whilst still erudite, was marked by a playfulness rather than by antiquarian rigour. In a flurry of novelty, both in style and in some cases new materials, buildings appeared that were inspired by Indian, Islamic, Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, Roman or a combination of styles. These decades saw buildings as surprising and diverse as Samuel Cockerell's (1753-1827) Indian-inspired Sezincote in Gloucestershire<sup>162</sup> and the wonderfully pleasing jumble of eastern influences at John Nash's (1752-1835) Royal Pavilion in Brighton (1815-22).<sup>163</sup>

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162 "...skilfully grafted oriental details on to basically English forms". Sezincote was built for the architect's brother, Sir Charles Cockerell between 1805 and 1820. Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 263-4.

163 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 692.

Many of the architects who worked during the first few decades of the 19th century were conversant with a variety of styles and had few qualms about how they employed them. Indeed, this was seen to be desirable. Thomas Hopper (1776-1856), was the architect of such assured diversity as the Henry VII period conservatory at Carlton House for the Prince Regent, the Gothic splendour of Margham Abbey and the neo-Norman masterpiece Penrhyn Castle. One of his last houses was the Jacobean remodelling at Wivenhoe House, now part of the University of Essex. His name is not as well known as one would imagine, but he is remembered for a quote which neatly encapsulates the eclectic movement, "It is an architect's business to understand all styles and to be in favour of none".<sup>164</sup>

This softening of doctrine led to some of the most imaginative buildings of the period, but has also been seen as indicative of a low point in the history of English architecture. John Summerson believed that:

The story of English architecture comes, in 1830, to a natural halting place; scarcely, however, a place where one would wish to halt for long, for at no moment, perhaps, in the whole period we have traversed was English architecture so feeble, so deficient in genius, so poor in promise.<sup>165</sup>

## **The Creation of the Institute of British Architects.**

According to Summerson, the creation of the Institute of British Architects in 1834, with de Grey as its inaugural and longest serving President, was a reaction to the perception that architecture was "slumped... into the chaos of incompetence", and

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<sup>164</sup> Burton, Neil. "Thomas Hopper 1776-1856." In *The Architectural Outsiders*, ed. Roderick Brown, (London: Waterstone and Company, 1985), 114.

<sup>165</sup> John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, (London: Yale University Press 1953, 1993 reprint), 496.

aimed “to retrieve architecture's lost reputation and to provide for it a status independent of the fluctuations and degradations of patronage by the individual”.<sup>166</sup>

This may be a rather simplistic view.

Over the decades before the foundation of the RIBA a number of societies had already been formed to promote good quality architecture and above all to defend the interests of the architects themselves. The specific background for the creation of the RIBA was that during the preceding decades there had been a transition towards consolidating the interests of architects, as separate from the other skills and trades within the building sector. As Crinson and Lubbock observe:

At the... time the architect's function and status were also put in question by the new large general contractors who could control both design and finance, either by bypassing the architect or employing him as a cog in their own machine of divided labour.<sup>167</sup>

The foundation of what was to become the RIBA addressed this by attempting “to establish the status and specific role of its members”.<sup>168</sup> It aimed to do this through a combination of prestige, influence and the promotion of educational standards.

One of the roles of the RIBA was to provide an opportunity for architectural discourse, a role which de Grey, as president of the Institute understood and supported, as is demonstrated by comments made about him in the opening speech of an early Institute meeting:

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<sup>166</sup> John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, (London: Yale University Press 1953, 1993 reprint), 497.

<sup>167</sup> Mark Crinson and Jules Lubbock, *Architecture. Art or Profession? Three hundred years of architectural education in Britain*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 41.

<sup>168</sup> Crinson and Lubbock, *Architecture. Art or Profession?* (1994), 41.

The liberality of our noble President, in opening his house to the members of the Institute, cannot be too highly appreciated, and it is with no ordinary feelings the Council allude to a circumstance, which has given rise to similar meetings at the houses of several members of the council. These have been productive of much intercourse of the most gratifying description, and the cordiality, thus brought about among members of the same profession, forms a peculiar feature in our society.<sup>169</sup>

Through his connection with the RIBA de Grey must have been fully conversant with not only the popular styles of the day, but the more eclectic and outlying styles which were being explored. This then, is the background against which de Grey built his greatest architectural achievement. He and his fellow RIBA founders believed that architecture was at risk of losing its way and that an academic rigour and consistency of standards needed to be applied. This can be seen from the erudite papers listed in the transactions of the Institute of British Architects from the start. It might be argued that given the complete lack of French architecture being designed or built in England over the previous centuries de Grey's unusual choice of French style was even more surprising. Although it can be considered to be a part of the move towards eclecticism it also shows a conviction that this style was the only one appropriate to the setting of Wrest Park, rather than being driven by the personal fancy of untrammelled eclecticism alone.

### **Design books by British architects in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.**

The decades leading up to the building of Wrest Park were marked by tumultuous changes in the ethos of architectural design. The push and pull of Palladianism versus Gothicism had led to a new outlook, the Picturesque. This in turn spawned an

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<sup>169</sup> *Transactions of the Institute of British Architects. Volume 1 Part 1.* p. Xxviii. RIBA.



era of insouciant eclecticism. Any style could be and was experimented with, sometimes within the same building. Egyptian, Chinese and Islamic influences jostled alongside variations of the more familiar Italian and Northern European styles. Pevsner referred to a “general loosening of the reins of classical discipline”.<sup>170</sup> Eclecticism was the backdrop against which de Grey conceived of a French style house for his estate at Wrest Park.

Eclecticism built on the ideas of the Picturesque movement. As we have seen, this movement began with an increased interest by country house owners in the gardens and landscapes within which their houses stood. Whilst being rooted in the theory of the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque, in execution the aims of the picturesque movement became diluted into a more general fashion for pleasing homes and landscapes. The fashion became to place a building perfectly within its setting in a way that would maximise the beauty of that setting by means of the most aesthetically pleasing building style. It soon became apparent that architects who designed pretty buildings for pretty locations need not be limited by an English pastoral palette. Strawberry Hill perhaps led the way here with its romanticised version of a Gothic past. Freed from formality architects began to let their imaginations run in new directions. For architects, one way of demonstrating their creativity, with an eye on gaining work, was to produce a book of building designs.

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<sup>170</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner and Bridget Cherry, *The Buildings of England, London, Volume 1*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1957, revised edition 1973), 512.

## Who wrote the design books and why?

This is all very well, but what exactly was being built at the time? One way of gaining an insight into what fashions the architects of the period were promoting is to examine the large canon of architectural design books that were published between the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century. These books were written by architects to showcase their designs. This was not unusual of course, but the difference is that where previously it was the most important architects of the day who published their designs, during this period it was mainly young, untried architects who were producing books. With the exception of Sir John Soane, none of the major names in architecture produced books during the fifty or so years after the 1780s.<sup>171</sup> Design books represented either young architects trying to win an inaugural commission or those with small practices of the type that required publicity to keep the orders coming in.

The usual route to becoming an independent architect was through working in a lowly position in the office of an already established practitioner, with varying amounts of actual training and mentorship on offer. This was often coupled with some training through admission into the Royal Academy of Arts School. Some young, aspiring architects were successful in seeking patronage in order to carry out a Grand Tour during which they studied at first hand the classical architectural traditions and made all-important professional contacts. Without a patron or a private income it could be difficult for a young architect to get his career off the starting

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<sup>171</sup> “Of the most famous architects of the day only Soane is represented. Wyatt, Holland, Dance, Nash and Smirke did not publish designs.” Sandra Blutman, “Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815”, *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 26.

blocks. It is not surprising therefore that many turned to writing design books in order to get noticed. During the previous decades it was the preserve of the major names in the field, such as James Paine (1717-1789), William Chambers (1723-1796) and Robert Adam (1728-1792) who produced books of designs. These were expensive volumes, published by subscription. The books that began to proliferate as the nineteenth century dawned are representative of the reducing costs of printing and production, bringing publication within the means of the ambitious but relatively impecunious young architect. As White put it:

For the aspiring young late Georgian architect, yet to make his way – and indeed for the established architect keen to capitalize on the market for an increasingly fashionable genre – two potentially fruitful ways of advertising his skills and attracting clients were to exhibit at the Royal Academy in London, and to publish books of his designs.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Roger White, *Cottage Ornés. The Charms of the Simple Life*. (London: Yale University Press, 2017), 89.

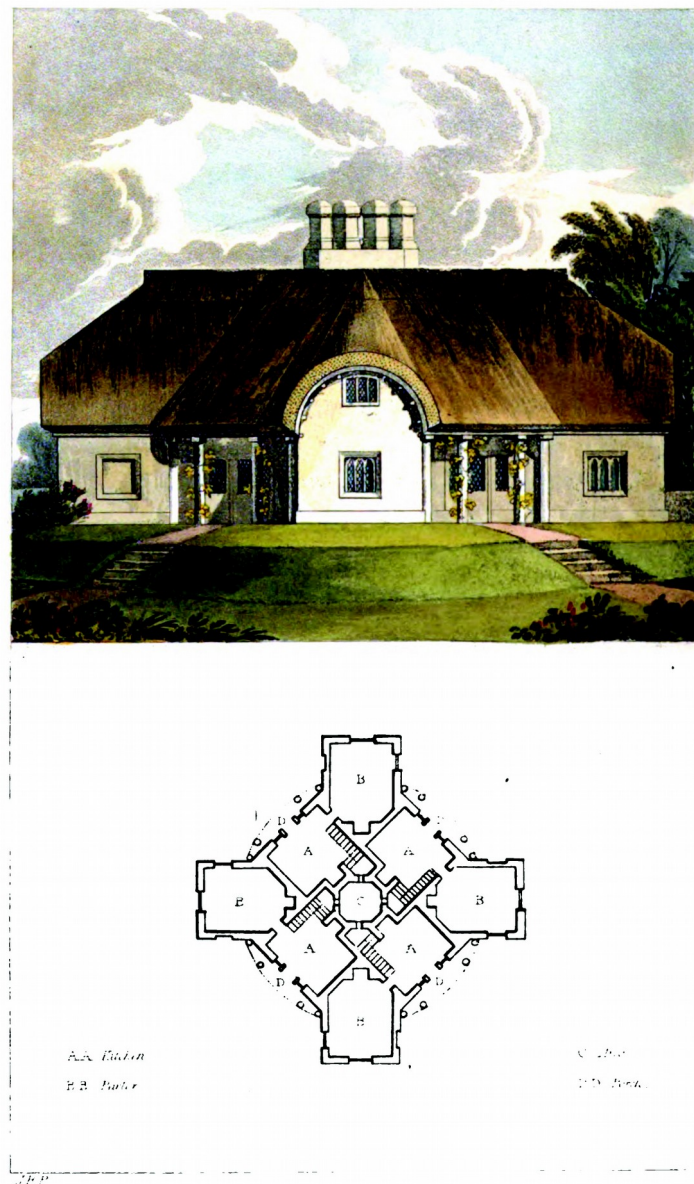


Fig 25: A design for workers cottages by Papworth, *Designs for Rural Residences* 1818, Plate 2.

The principal reason behind these publications was self-promotion<sup>173</sup> and often these books include delicately worded self-praise. There was more to it than justifying their own talents though. Alongside the need to promote their skills, these men had other motivations. In most cases they believed that their designs were a way of helping to

<sup>173</sup> Sandra Blutman, "Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815", *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 26.

elevate the taste of the reader or even of the country.<sup>174</sup> As Blutman put it, “The desire to extend the elegance of the traditional country house downward to the less wealthy classes was the self-conscious motive of many authors”.<sup>175</sup> In some cases the intent of the architects was to demonstrate that the principles of their work could improve the lives of their fellow men, especially the rural working poor, as with Papworth's designs for worker's cottages (see figure 25).<sup>176</sup> William Thomas claimed that he had published at the behest of his friends, and was driven by a “conviction of these truths”.<sup>177</sup> John Plaw was more honest in that he, “begs leave to inform his Friends and the Public, that he furnishes Designs, and working Drawings, and will advise to attend to their execution (if required), at the usual commission.”<sup>178</sup> James Malton, Richard Elsam and Robert Lugar all state that they are available to assist in the execution of their designs.<sup>179</sup> Dearn and Pocock are the same, as is Busby who, “makes a point of commending the wisdom of the public in contacting the authors of

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174 A typical example of this can be found in the introduction to Gandy's book. In this he explains in some detail his dismay that the country has such a poor design tradition, of “vile and almost barbarous taste” and that in his book “the Author's general aim has been to diffuse a more extended idea of taste, even in buildings of the lowest class, and in every part of the country, than prevails at present”. Joseph Gandy, *Designs for Cottages, Cottage Farms and Other Rural Buildings*. (London: John Harding, 1805), x.

175 Sandra Blutman, “Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815”, *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 26.

176 Papworth, while believing decorative elements, or “the symbols of ease and luxury are incongruous with the labourer's busy life and frugal means, and ought therefore be omitted” also thought that there was benefit in providing well-built, economically arranged homes for workers. “The broken casement, the patched wall, the sunken roof, the withered shrub, are corresponding testimonies of the husbandman's relaxed energies and broken spirit. The porch in which he rests after the fatigues of the day, ornamented by some flowering creeper, at once affords him shade and repose; neatness and cleanliness connected with these other means of external cheerfulness, bespeak that elasticity of mind, and spring of action, which produce industry and cheerfulness”. Papworth also suggested that a garden would save the labourer from “the temptations of the village alehouse”. This then, was architecture designed with the intention of improving the life of others, although articulated in a rather patronising tone. John B. Papworth, *Designs for Rural Residences, consisting of a Series of Designs for Cottages, Decorated Cottages, Small Villas and Other Ornamental Buildings*. (London: Ackerman, 1818), 9-10.

177 William Thomas, *Original Designs in Architecture*. (London: Thomas. 1783), Preface.

178 John Plaw, *Sketches for Country Houses, Villas, and Rural Dwellings*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1800), 1.

179 Sandra Blutman, “Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815”, *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 26.

these books rather than attempting to build directly from the designs without seeking professional advice.”<sup>180</sup> The exception to this is in 'Nutshells' by Jose MacPacque. He claimed to be a “Bricklayer's Labourer”, rather than an architect. He had actually been an assistant to architect George Dance the younger for many years, making his claim rather disingenuous. He offers only plans, advocating that the client instead work directly with a builder rather than using an architect.<sup>181</sup>

### **How would a prospective house builder decide upon style?**

A land owning gentleman who aspired to build a new house on his estate might have arrived at a choice of style in a variety of ways. An educated gentleman, who may well have travelled in Europe or beyond, would already have any number of preferences to inform his views of what styles were desirable. Fashions were followed, architects were recommended, wives had opinions. In short, architectural design books were just one of many ways in which a house builder might become conversant with his own taste. By his own account, de Grey first imagined a French style house for Wrest during his time in Paris.<sup>182</sup>

What the books do provide is an overview of what styles were prominent at the time, and what architects were designing, even if many of the designs in the books never got off the page. They represent an account of how the competing styles of the last

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180 Charles A. Busby, *A Series of Designs for Villas and Country Houses*. (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1808), 2.

181 Sandra Blutman, “Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815”, *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 26.

182 In his description of the creation of his house de Grey recounted how during his first visit to Paris in 1822 he had noticed and admired some summer houses, the style of which he copied two years later when he built a pair of gate lodges at Wrest Park which “quite confirmed as to the taste and style of architecture, if ever I built a new house”. A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

decades of the eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth century translated into what was actually popular and achievable. Blutman warns that the influence of the books is difficult to quantify, saying that “Most books drew their ideas from what had been and was being built rather than the other way around”.<sup>183</sup> There was a large number of these publications produced at the time.<sup>184</sup> Even if they had limited influence they are nonetheless useful to the architectural historian to get a sense of what was really seen as popular at the time, or at least as a barometer of what styles the architects of the time thought most likely to bring in a commission. As McMordie put it:

Between 1790 and 1835 more than sixty books illustrating designs for small to moderately large houses were published. All of these, but particularly those devoted entirely or in part to cottage designs, have a particular interest for the historian for the evidence they contain of changing tastes and ideas through this period of social upheaval.<sup>185</sup>

## **What did the books contain?**

The range of design books of the period covers many types of buildings, from large and lavish country houses to tiny and simple gate lodges. However, the majority of the design books at the time related to modest houses and cottages. The cottage designs were in some cases for estate housing for workers, but often for buildings with leisure in mind; hunting lodges or cottages ornés for decorous pursuits. This

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183 Sandra Blutman, “Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815”, *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 32.

184 The precise number of design books by architects published during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is difficult to state with any accuracy. Blutman suggested thirty between 1780 and 1815, McMordie suggested over sixty between 1790 and 1835 and White put forward a number between forty and fifty publications between the 1780s and 1840s. Blutman, “Books of designs,” 25. McMordie, “Picturesque Pattern Books” 43. White, *Cottage Ornés* 89.

185 Michael McMordie, “Picturesque Pattern Books and Pre-Victorian Designers.” *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 18, (1975): 43.

perhaps reflects the aspirations and realism of the architects involved, for although a country house commission might make for a lifetime career, smaller houses were more commonly built and therefore more likely to be the sustaining work of most small practices. As White put it, "Some authors optimistically focused on mansions for the aristocracy and the wealthy. Others thought, perhaps more realistically, that designs for more modest cottages for tenants might be a sprat to catch a mackerel."<sup>186</sup> Mowl suggested that cottages were becoming more fashionable due to an increasing sense of social responsibility:

The century long reign of Gothic and classical fantasy was near its end. In its place a new feeling for an essentially native rusticity in cottage form was emerging. Cottages that would house their occupants in a style appropriate to a new generation of landowners, who felt bound to make gestures at least to social responsibility.<sup>187</sup>

The move towards rusticated simplicity as embodied in the tenets of the picturesque movement met well with the social awareness that was growing within Victorian society, as articulated by architects such as Papworth and Gandy. This created a new market for cottage designs, and is one explanation of the prominence of cottage designs as opposed to large houses in the design books.

When considering the reasons why de Grey chose to build his new house at Wrest in a French style, I looked at a large number of design books from the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first three decades of the nineteenth century. I wanted to get a sense of what styles were being promoted and also to verify that French style was unusual during the period. Not only can these books be considered as a

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<sup>186</sup> Roger White, *Cottage Ornés. The Charms of the Simple Life*. (London: Yale University Press, 2017), 89.

<sup>187</sup> Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *Trumpet at a Distant Gate*. (London: Waterstone and Company, 1985), 76.



barometer of prevailing tastes, they also demonstrate the range of styles being adopted. What I found was that the designs were overwhelmingly either classical or gothic. Some had the decorative trappings of other styles such as Islamic or Chinese, but on the whole these were merely decorative additions to more standard fare. Of the design books Blutman wrote:

Their character and content give an indication of the changes in conception and creation of country houses in a period which saw the rise of a very large number of superficially diverse and idiosyncratic domestic buildings.<sup>188</sup>

The term “superficially diverse” is pertinent, because Wrest Park represents an actual diversity, a single example of a style not adopted anywhere else during the period.

I did not look at the books to establish whether de Grey used any of the designs in his house, although I did take that into consideration while I was studying them. I looked at them to get a sense of the prevailing styles of the time, to see whether French style really was as unusual as I assumed. Even so, it is not unreasonable to assume that de Grey was familiar with some or all of the design books that I have looked at. In fact, he knew some of the architects, in some cases quite well as with J. B. Papworth who was one of the founder members of the RIBA and vice-president to de Grey's president. De Grey was evidently not influenced by what he saw in these books as the house at Wrest Park is strikingly at odds with everything else that was being designed in England at the time.

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<sup>188</sup> Sandra Blutman, “Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815”, *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 25.

## The architects and their design books.

It is useful to look in greater detail at the architects who produced design books during the period, and to look at exactly what their designs were. Below is a brief summary of some of the architects and their books that I have examined. I have looked at the books chronologically in order to establish whether there was any discernable theme running through them, or whether the styles detailed within them changes as the years progress.

**James Peacock** Wrote 'Nutshells' under pseudonym of Jose MacPacke (1738? - 1814).<sup>189</sup>

Peacock was assistant Clerk of the Works to the City of London under George Dance the younger. He held this position for forty years. He was interested in architecture as a tool for social reform and produced writings and architectural designs to this effect. In 1777 his work '*Outlines of a scheme for the general relief, instruction, employment, and maintenance of the poor*' was published, one of a number of similar works he produced during this period. In terms of architectural design books of the period that I examined, Peacock produced, under the pseudonym of Jose MacPacke, a book titled '*Nutshells*', in 1785. It is one of the earlier books that I looked at, but I feel is worth including as in a modest way it was influential, even if just to be refuted. Unlike his contemporaries, Peacock suggested that his designs might be used as a guide for builders, meaning that a client might chose a design that he liked and rather than pay an architect he could work with a local builder instead. This was an unconventional suggestion at a time when

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<sup>189</sup> Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 744-745.

architects were seeking to place themselves above the mere builder in terms of skill and importance. The idea that a well-executed plan might be brought to fruition from the page without further advice from a trained architect was anathema to Peacock's immediate contemporaries and those coming in the following decades. It was printed for the author and sold by C. Dilly in the Poultry, London. It begins with tables of proportions as a text book for architects after which there are a number of plans, without elevation drawings. They are in some cases rather fantastical. There is no commentary regarding styles, they are just plans, none of which have much in common with Wrest Park.

**John Plaw (1746-1820).**

Colvin presumed that this was the same John Plaw who was an apprentice of Thomas Kaygill in 1759. Kaygill was a member of the Tylers and Bricklayers Company. By 1763 Plaw won an award from the Society of Arts, at which time he was described as an “architect and master builder in Westminster”. Many of the architects who produced design books had little or no success as practicing architects. Of a few who had careers in architecture, Plaw was one of the more successful. He is perhaps most well known for a circular, classically-styled house on the pretty Lake District island of Belle Isle, built for Thomas English in 1774 (see figure 26).

His numerous published works differed from some of the other design books of the period in that they contained some of his completed commissions alongside unexecuted designs. Colvin states that Plaw's books, published between 1785 and

1813, “were among the earliest of the cottage and villa books which became so popular during the first quarter of the nineteenth century”.<sup>190</sup>



Fig 26: Belle Isle, Windermere by John Plaw. Undated postcard.

Plaw said of cottages and humble buildings; “What man of genius would think of building a new house, having the patchwork and bungling appearance of an old one?” Blutman wrote that, “This consciously anti-Picturesque comment is inconsistent with the designs presented, designs which partake of thatch and broken outlines”.<sup>191</sup> In his book of designs for country houses and villas, published in 1800,<sup>192</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 761-762.

<sup>191</sup> Sandra Blutman, “Books of Designs for Country Houses 1780-1815”, *Architectural History, Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 11, (1968): 31.

<sup>192</sup> John Plaw, *Sketches for country houses, villas and rural dwellings*. (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1800).

he displayed a large number of designs. These are largely unremarkable, mainly classical, some Italianate with a handful of gothic. There are one or two interesting flourishes, but nothing even approaching French in style.

**Richard Elsam** (d.o.b. Unknown).

Elsam studied under Robert Browne, who was the clerk of Works at Kew Palace.<sup>193</sup>

He was an interesting if difficult character, given to conflict and self-sabotage. He exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1797 and 1807. Until 1803 he worked in the War Office designing military barracks. Elsam's published designs reveal him as "a self-conscious seeker after ingeniously geometrical plans clothed either in neo-classical or picturesque Gothic dress".<sup>194</sup>

**Joseph Michael Gandy** (1771-1843).

Gandy's father worked at White's Club on St James's Square, and when James Wyatt was employed to rebuild the club in 1787 it afforded the opportunity for Wyatt to be shown some sketches by the young Gandy, with the favourable result of the boy being taken on in Wyatt's office. Gandy joined the Academy School in 1789. He won the Silver Medal in his first year and the Gold Medal in the following year. Gandy completed his training in the way that many young men did at the time, with a tour of Italy between 1794 and 1797. His tour was paid for by John Martindale, the proprietor of White's Club. On his return to England after the bankruptcy of Martindale, Gandy became a draughtsman in Sir John Soane's office. "to whom he was, in one way or other, to be indebted for financial assistance for the rest of his

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<sup>193</sup> Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 344-345.

<sup>194</sup> Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary*, 344-345.

life".<sup>195</sup> Although he had his own practice during some periods of his life it would appear that most of his paid work came from Soane, who commissioned Gandy to paint watercolour perspectives of his architectural designs. Gandy is not known for any buildings in his own right, but is remembered for a series of rather astonishing paintings of architectural fantasies which he exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1800 and 1838.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary*, 388.

<sup>196</sup> Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary*, 388.

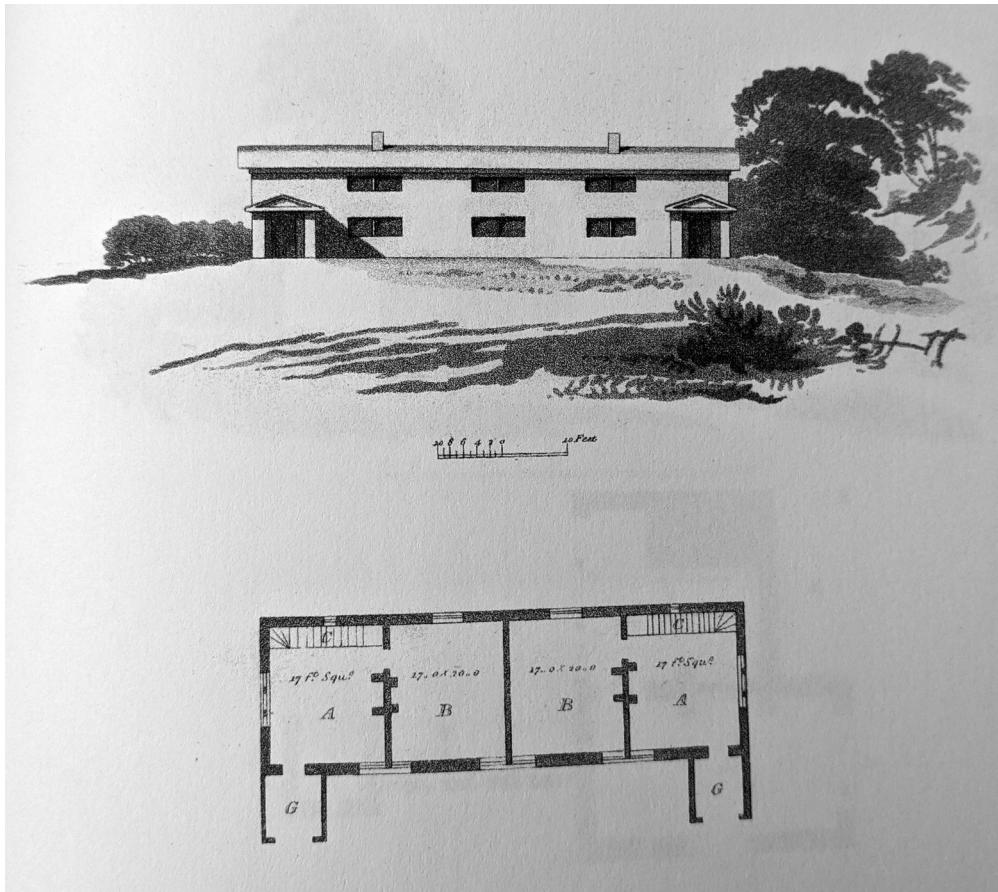


Fig 27: One of Gandy's designs, from *Designs for Cottages, Cottage Farms and Other Rural Buildings*. 1805 plate v.

He published two books of architectural design, both in 1805.<sup>197</sup> The designs in these books are notable for their clean lines and lack of ornament, rather at odds with the picturesque fashions of the time, and certainly not employing any of the French style motifs used by de Grey at Wrest Park. Some of Gandy's designs would not look out of place in a modern housing development (see figure 27). He evidently felt that good taste was lacking in small buildings of the time, writing in the introduction to his '*Designs for Cottages*' that "If we look around the country, and except the seats of a few of the Nobility and Gentry, who have acquired a taste for

<sup>197</sup> Joseph Gandy, *The Rural Architect*, (London: John Harding, 1805), Joseph Gandy, *Designs for Cottages, Cottage Farms and other Rural Buildings*, (London: John Harding, 1805).

the Fine Arts, we shall find but little to admire in the Civil Architecture of Great Britain".<sup>198</sup>

### **Robert Lugar (c.1773-1855).**

Lugar was born in Ardleigh in Essex. His father was Edward Lugar, a carpenter from Colchester.<sup>199</sup> Colvin suggests an early association with John Nash.<sup>200</sup> He had his own architectural practice in London from around 1799. From that period he was a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy into the 1820s. He was an active and reasonably successful architect. His largest commission was Cyfarthfa Castle in Glamorgan, completed in 1825. Lugar published a number of design books. The earlier ones were of designs while the later ones included executed commissions.<sup>201</sup> Lugar's design books show an architect who broadly followed the Picturesque movement while also proving to have the adaptability of style that marked the period. His designs used classical, gothic, castellated and ornamented styles, sometimes in the same building. There is no sign of any French influence.

### **J Miller.**

This architect was the author of '*The Country Gentleman's Architect*', 1787. A

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198 Joseph Gandy, *Designs for Cottages, Cottage Farms and Other Rural Buildings*, (London: John Harding, 1805), iv.

199 Leach, P. (2012, January 05). Lugar, Robert (1772/3–1855), architect. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 11 Mar.2020, from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-37697>.

200 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 625-627.

201 Robert Lugar, *Architectural Sketches for Cottages, Rural Dwellings, and Villas*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1805; repr. 1815 and 1823), *The Country Gentleman's Architect; Designs for Farm Houses and Yards*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1807), *Plans and Views of Buildings executed in England and Scotland in the Castellated and Other Styles*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1811, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 1823), *Villa Architecture, a Collection of Views, with Plans, of Buildings executed in England, Scotland, etc*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1828).



collection of designs for cottages, farmhouses, villas and lodges, of which there were several later editions up to 1810. Nothing else is known about Miller, who has been confused with other people of the same name in DNB and elsewhere.<sup>202</sup> Of Miller's book Mowl wrote, "The reserve of the book's title is borne out by the designs". These were of "unadventurous Palladian elegance".<sup>203</sup>

### **Edward Gyfford (1773-1856).**

Gyfford studied under J Lewis and having entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1789 he was awarded the Silver Medal in 1791, and the Gold Medal in 1792 for a 'Design for a House of Lords and Commons'.<sup>204</sup> He was not a successful architect and he made his living as a draftsman. He produced two volumes of design books.<sup>205</sup> His designs were mainly classical with some gothic details. On the whole they are very bland and unremarkable. In the introduction to the first of the two books Gyfford wrote that "Various efforts have been made to forward with success, the labours of the study of architecture." He outlined that he was not attempting to explain "the advancement of the art of building from its first introduction into this country to the present time",<sup>206</sup> but that "it will be sufficient to notice the number of beautiful specimens of Grecian and Gothic Architecture, which the public spirit and abilities of former times have raised for the admiration of posterity; they furnish us with striking examples of their first ideas of proportion, and their nice discernment and

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202 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 652.

203 Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw, *Trumpet at a Distant Gate*. (London: Waterstone and Company, 1985), 61.

204 Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary*, 441-442.

205 Edward Gyfford, *Designs for Elegant Cottages and Small Villas*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1806), *Designs for Small Picturesque Cottages and Hunting Boxes*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1806-7).

206 Edward Gyfford, *Designs for Elegant Cottages and Small Villas*. (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1806) v.

discrimination of taste, as applied to their edifices".<sup>207</sup> During a period of eclecticism in architecture Gyfford at least is clear in his sensibilities. To him, only classical and gothic were acceptable styles, although in his book designs he made occasional use of some more exotic flourishes including a chinoiserie inspired design (see figure 28).<sup>208</sup>

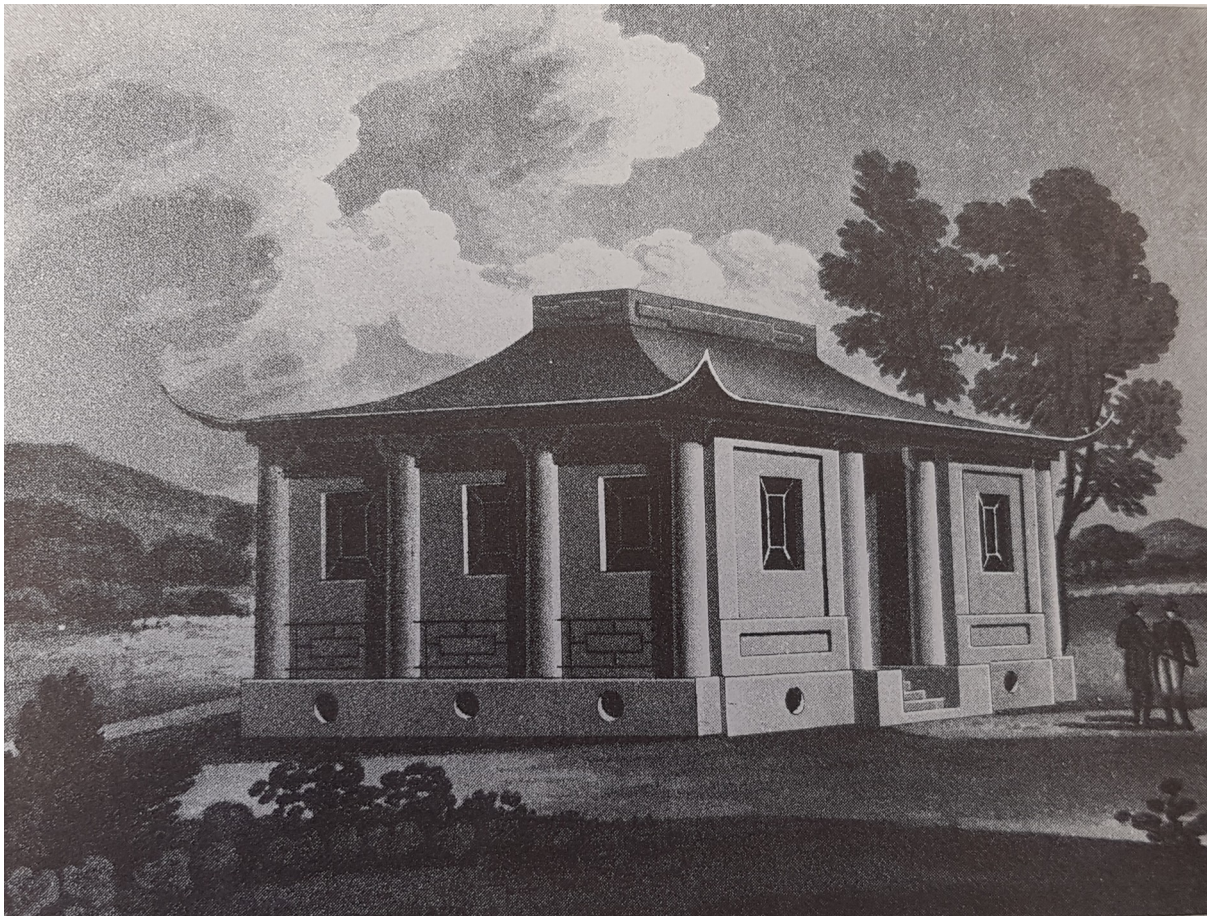


Fig 28: Design for a Chinese Doric style cottage by E. Gyfford. *Designs for Small Picturesque Cottages and Hunting Boxes*. Plate 10.

207 Edward Gyfford, *Designs for Elegant Cottages and Small Villas*. (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1806) vii.

208 Edward Gyfford, *Designs for Small Picturesque Cottages and Hunting Boxes*. (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1807), Plate 10.

### **Thomas Downes Wilmot Dearn (1777-1853).**

This is likely to be the same Thomas Dearn who was an apprentice of William Thomas in 1793, “who exhibited designs for mausolea at the Royal Academy in 1798 and 1799 and in 1806 as TDW Dearn”.<sup>209</sup> It seems that he was unsuccessful in gaining any executed commissions, but he did produce a number of architectural design books.<sup>210</sup> In the introduction to Dearn's 1806 book he provides a general criticism of other architects, not named but alluded to. This is, of course, his humble opinion but it speaks volumes about a frustration in not getting any architectural work. His designs are conventional and lean towards classicism, with no designs in a French style.

### **William Fuller Pocock (1779-1849).**

W F Pocock was the eldest son of a successful carpenter and joiner from London, who subsequently moved to Leyton in Essex. His father had hoped that the young Pocock would follow him into his building and joinery business, but he instead opted to become an architect. He became a pupil of Charles Beazley, after which he worked as an assistant to Thomas Hardwick. He was admitted to the Academy Schools in 1801 and he opened his independent practice around 1803. By the following year he had started to gain commissions after which he appears to have been employed as an architect for the rest of his working life. He also had success as a speculative builder, building Trevor Place in Knightsbridge. He authored a

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209 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 297.

210 Thomas Downes Wilmot Dearn, *Sketches in Architecture, consisting of Original Designs for Public and Private Buildings*, (London: John Cawthorne, 1806), *Sketches in Architecture, consisting of designs for Cottages and Rural Dwellings*, (London: John Cawthorne, 1807), *The Bricklayer's Guide*, (London: John Cawthorne, 1809), *Designs for Lodges and Entrances to Parks, Paddocks and Pleasure Grounds*, (London: John Cawthorne, 1811 and 1823).

number of publications but his earliest was a design book, explicitly aimed at gaining commissions.<sup>211</sup> Colvin put his professional success down to his being a, “meticulous, hard-working man, reserved in manner and 'scrupulously clean and neat' in appearance. His probity and business efficiency do much to explain his extensive practice as a surveyor. As an architect he was competent but unremarkable.”<sup>212</sup> His ODNB entry states that his works, “were executed in a mixture of styles: Pocock was happiest as a classicist, but was adept at designing in a restrained Tudorbethan idiom also”.<sup>213</sup> His restrained designs did not show any rococo flourishes or other explicitly French touches.

As an early member of the Institute for British Architects he was probably known to de Grey.

### **Charles Augustin Busby (1786-1834).**

C A Busby, was the son of a musician and author, Dr Thomas Busby. He first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1801, entering the Academy Schools two years later. Lacking the means to set up an independent practice, Busby worked for and with a number of other architects and his work is often associated with these partnerships (which all seem to have ended acrimoniously). Despite the lack of his own practice he was almost continuously in work with the most notable of his

211 William Fuller Pocock, *Architectural designs for rustic cottages, picturesque dwellings, villas, etc. With appropriate scenery*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1807). *Modern finishings for rooms: a Series of Designs for Vestibules, Staircases, Libraries, etc.*, ( High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1811; repr 1823, 1837), *Designs for Churches and Chapels*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1819), *Observations on Bond in Brickwork*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1839).

212 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 796.

213 Bowdler, R. (2004, September 23). Pocock, William Fuller (1779–1849), architect. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 30 Jan. 2020, from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-22428>.

projects being the classical facades of Kempton in Brighton, on which he worked with Amon Henry Wilds.<sup>214</sup> In keeping with other minor architects of his generation he published two volumes of designs early in his career.<sup>215</sup> The designs in these works are of a modest classical style with domes and porticoes. His views were more aligned to those of the eighteenth century than to the looser fashions that were coming to the fore. In the introduction to his book he wrote, "It was in Greece that the true spirit of Architecture was first manifested. There the fostering genius of Pericles inspired a noble emulation. The harmony and elegance, symmetry and grandeur of the buildings raised by his direction, have been the theme of admiration for twenty centuries, and at this day are deemed models of perfection."<sup>216</sup> Many of these architects suggested that their motivations were to improve taste, or to provide examples of good taste. Busby, for example, did not like the fashion for Egyptian styling, seeking instead the cleaner lines of the classical styles.

### **John Buonarotti Papworth (1775-1847).**

J B Papworth was born in London. His father, John Papworth was a prominent stuccoist, known for his work for the Office of Works under Sir William Chambers. Chambers recognised the young Papworth's skill in drawing and encouraged this path to be followed, rather than the medical career that had been planned for him. His artistic training took the form of drawing, sculpture and perspective drawing after which he worked first for the architect John Plaw, before becoming an apprentice to

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214 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 200-202.

215 Charles Augustin Busby, *A Series of Designs for Villas and Country Houses*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1808), *A Collection of Designs for Modern Embellishments, suitable to Parlours and Dining Rooms, Folding Doors, Chimney Pieces, Verandas, Friezes, etc*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1808).

216 Charles Busby, *A Series of Designs for Villas and Country Houses*, (High Holborn: J. Taylor, 1808), 6.

the builder Thomas Wapshott in 1789. He went on to have a successful career as a “prolific” architect.<sup>217</sup> He wrote about various aspects of construction including a number of architectural design books.<sup>218</sup> His apprenticeship to a builder is apparent in his writing. His book *Rural Residences* is full of genuinely instructive narrative concerning all aspects of successful building, from drainage and water supply to regionally sourced building materials. The illustrations to his books are beautiful and a reflection of his training under a variety of artists, but unlike other architects of the time who were producing pattern books, the illustrations are not merely pretty pictures, but readable representations, which when accompanied by his mostly sensible building plans give what might be considered an accurate representation of how his buildings might actually have looked should they have been built.

Papworth was one of the original twelve architects who formed the Institute of British Architects in 1834. He was vice-president several times and after his retirement in 1846 became an honorary member and was presented with a commemorative salver.<sup>219</sup>

His entry into the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography states that, “Papworth's contribution to the evolution of design is particularly important, spanning,

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217 Howard Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840*. (London: Yale University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1995), 730.

218 J. B. Papworth, *Essay on the Causes of Dry Rot in Timber, 1803. Select Views of London, with historical and descriptive sketches of some of the most interesting public buildings*, (London, 1816), *Rural Residences, consisting of a series of designs for cottages, small villas, and other buildings, with observations on landscape gardening*, (London: Ackerman, 1818 and 1832), *Hints on ornamental gardening, consisting of a series of designs for garden buildings, useful and decorative gates, fences, railings, etc, accompanied by observations on the principles and theory of rural improvements*, (London, 1823). He also contributed to Sir William Chambers's *Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture*, 1826.

219 Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary*, 731.

as it does, the changes in taste and fashion that mark the transition from the late Georgian to the early Victorian periods.”<sup>220</sup>

His designs are well-executed and represent the usual mixture of classical and gothic buildings, with some Norman touches. While fine, the designs are not as striking as the work of de Grey at Wrest Park.

To summarise, these books were written mainly by young men at the start of what they hoped would be a career in architecture, with only one or two exceptions such as Plaw, Lugar and Papworth. In many ways, the mere existence of the books tells us as much as can be gleaned from their contents. The decades running up to the 1830s were a time of opportunity for the young aspiring architect, for whom printing design books was much more within reach due to reducing production costs. It was during this period that efforts were being made in order to organise architects as a profession, culmination in the creation of the RIBA. Against this background, self-promotion in the form of design books can be seen to both desirable and sensible. The contents of the books, individually for the most part and certainly as a group, are so overwhelmingly pedestrian that they provide very little in the way of new information. There is very little contained within them that provides much beyond modest variations of the tried and tested uniformity of classical architecture, with the occasional dip into gothic waters. The books do not truly represent the eclecticism that can be seen in country houses of the period. More modest dwellings, which are

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<sup>220</sup> Cates, A., & Elliott, J. (2008, January 03). Papworth, John Buonarotti (1775–1847), architect and designer. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 31 Jan. 2020, from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-21254>.

the main subject of these books, appear to have been designed within narrower confines. Against this background, de Grey's French house stands out as utterly unique.

### **French influence on the design of the English Country House.**

The French style was adopted at some other English country houses, but no large scale exterior works in this style were carried out during the 1830s. A closer examination of a sample group of Bedfordshire and the surrounding counties of Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex shows just how little the French style, particularly 18th century style, was used in country house architecture during the 19th century. The entire century should be considered for an insight not only into what other building styles were being adopted at the time that de Grey was building Wrest House that could have influenced him, but also to gauge whether the design of Wrest had an influence on others.

The only major example of French style architecture before Wrest is the north façade of Boughton House in Northamptonshire, built in 1695. Pevsner described it as:

perhaps the most French-looking 17th century building in England... It has such French motifs as banded rustication on the ground floor, a mansard roof, and a complete absence of all ornament.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner (revised by Bridget Cherry). *The Buildings of England. Northamptonshire* (London: Yale University Press, 1961, 2002 reprint), 112. What Pevsner omits to mention is that the typically French silhouette of the mansard roof was given a more regional appearance by the use of the local Collyweston stone roof slates, typified by a rustic elegance and a characteristic size gradation with small slates at the roof apex and larger at the gutters, rather than the more streamlined flat Welsh slates of unified size used by de Grey at Wrest.



Unlike Wrest Park which is French throughout, Boughton showed a French influence only along its north front.<sup>222</sup> The house that de Grey built at Wrest is a fully realised single-phased French style mansion, rather than an accretion of styles built up over time and through successive campaigns of extension as is seen at Boughton. There are no other examples of French architecture in English country houses from before or during the 1830s. The only other major example comes later in the 19th century with the Rothschild's grand château at Waddesdon in Buckinghamshire.

Waddesdon Manor was built for Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild between 1874 and 1889. The Rothschilds were a prominent banking family with banking houses in England, France, Austria, Italy and Germany. Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild was from the Austrian branch of the family, but settled in England as a young man and married an English cousin, Evelina. He bought the Winchendon and Waddesdon estates from the Duke of Marlborough in 1874 and immediately began levelling the grounds for the creation of a house and gardens in which to display his art collections.<sup>223</sup> Baron de Rothschild commissioned a French architect, Gabriel-Hippolyte Destallieur to design the house and the French landscape designer Lainé to lay out the gardens and parkland. The house is very large and mainly of a 16th century French Renaissance style and is constructed of bath stone. It has a pair of distinctive circular staircase towers, topped with conical roofs; just part of a roofline with an abundantly varied silhouette. It is not a direct replica of any single known

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<sup>222</sup> The owner of Boughton, the first Duke of Montagu, was Ambassador in Paris for two periods during the 1670s, at which time he might have been influenced by the work being carried out by Le Vau at Versailles. John Summerson, *The Architecture of Victorian London*. (United States: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 247.

<sup>223</sup> Svend Eriksen. *Waddesdon Manor; A Guide to the House and its Contents*. (National Trust, revised edition 1979), 78.

building, but rather uses elements of many. Girouard considered that Waddesdon consists of:

...a patchwork of elements from Blois, Chambord, Anet, Maintenon and other historic chateaux, pieced together with no particular sensitivity.<sup>224</sup>

Although it was built forty years after Wrest House, Waddesdon Manor is the foremost house named in any discussion of French influenced architecture in England. It is interesting to consider why this might be so. De Grey's house was built with a clear intention of creating a building true to French styles both inside and out. This is also true of Waddesdon, but only up to a point. The interiors are not of a cohesive style in the way that de Grey's are, using instead a mixture of 16th and 18th century French styles.<sup>225</sup> Perhaps it is that the style of Waddesdon is more ornate and intentionally dazzling and ostentatious than the more moderate approach of de Grey that makes it the better known house. De Grey had a different motive for building his house. He felt that his house should be a fitting addition to the already established and well-regarded gardens at Wrest Park, leading to the choice of a less flamboyant version of the French style than was used at Waddesdon. The 18th century style that he adopted throughout his house was in keeping with the overall feel of the gardens. At Waddesdon the gardens were to be created alongside the house, leading to fewer design constraints and a greater freedom of style, resulting in a lavish interpretation of a slightly older French style. How much the relative fame of the house at Waddesdon is entwined with the fame of the Rothschilds is also a question to be considered. De Grey was relatively well known during his lifetime, but

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<sup>224</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 300.

<sup>225</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner and Elizabeth Williamson, *The Buildings of England. Buckinghamshire*. (London: Yale University Press, 1960, 2002 edition), 709.

he did not have the kind of prominence that the Rothschild family enjoyed not just during the 19th century but into the 21st. It is perhaps a combination of the strong and romantic style of the house at Waddesdon, coupled with the acclaim of the Rothschild family that make the house so much better known than Wrest House.

Although Waddesdon is the only other completely French style country house that was built in the same century as Wrest Park, there is another building that deserves an inclusion here. The Bowes Museum was built between 1869 and 1885 (before being opened officially in 1892) for John Bowes and his wife Joséphine Benoîte, to house and permanently display their collection of ceramics, furniture and Spanish art. It was designed by the French architect Jules Pellechet (1829-1903) and built by John Edward Watson of Newcastle. Pevsner compared it to “the town hall of a major provincial town in France,”<sup>226</sup> while Girouard identifies that it was based upon the 1855 Hotel de Ville in Le Havre by Brunet-Debaines.<sup>227</sup> Although it is not a country house, it was initially planned to provide accommodation for Bowes and his wife.

There were, in fact, other country houses built during the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the 1830s which displayed French design details. Girouard discusses these buildings in some detail in his section “The Nouveau-Riche style” in his seminal work *The Victorian Country House*.<sup>228</sup> He describes how French style became the adopted approach for newly monied industrialists and bankers, who used it as an explicit short-hand for wealth and position. The landed classes preferred their displays of wealth through

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226 Nikolaus Pevsner and Elizabeth Williamson, *The Buildings of England. County Durham*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 87.

227 Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 296.

228 Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*, 291-302.

architecture to be implicit and therefore began to eschew even modest French details. “Full blown French Renaissance was left to the enjoyment of parvenus. And enjoy it they did”.<sup>229</sup> But these houses were not entirely French in the way that Wrest, the Bowes Museum and Waddesdon are. They took elements of mainly 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings and re-imagined them, often on a large scale. It was the high roofs, spirited silhouettes and nonsymmetrical forms which were attractive to these later Victorian architects, often given “an unmistakably high-Victorian twist”.<sup>230</sup> They frequently included towers, turrets and over-sized bay windows. So, although we can see that after Wrest Park there were other French influenced country houses, they were of a very different style. Wrest Park is emphatically of an 18<sup>th</sup> century style throughout, unlike the French style mansions that were built in England later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which took a more magpie-like approach, putting together features in a more haphazard way, and quite unlike the stylistic uniformity achieved by de Grey.

De Grey’s home at Wrest Park is unique as a complete, single phase 18<sup>th</sup> French style country house in England. It was not part of a new fashion, nor did it herald the start of a trend for building country houses in an 18<sup>th</sup> century French style. The French style houses of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century were more truly pastiches of earlier French fashions and in fact have as little in common with Wrest Park as anything else that was built in the decades following de Grey’s construction.

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<sup>229</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 294.

<sup>230</sup> Girouard. *The Victorian Country House*, 298.

## **The design Wrest Park House. How did Earl de Grey arrive at his choice of building in a French style?**

De Grey's choice to build his new house in an 18th century French architectural style was unique in England at the time but he executed it with great accuracy, consistency and, I would argue, imagination. Any visitor to Wrest Park can see that the main house is undeniably French, but what makes it so? It is a coherently French building, employing a consistent style from plinth to apex. It is not merely a classical English country house made continental with the application of superimposed decorative flourishes. The mansard roof, with low, leaded onion domes has a low profile, unlike earlier French styles, but it is this detail that provides an aesthetic link particularly with the designs of J. F. Blondel. The rococo details above the windows and doors are, perhaps, more restrained than the buildings de Grey will have seen in Paris, but are nonetheless distinctively French in feel. The rhythm and the scale of the building, coupled with its position within the formality of a large terrace facing a parterre garden puts one in mind of the great French houses such as Chantilly or Vaux-le-Vicomte, buildings which also sat within the immediate confines of formal gardens, punctuated by canals with wider and wilder parkland surrounding them. De Grey made his house French not only by the architecture he used, but by the way the building sits within a setting made even more French by the gardens he added to the existing landscape. It would appear that de Grey was well versed in the language of French architecture and was not dabbling in a superficial way. There are several pieces of evidence that would seem to support this theory.

De Grey visited Paris four times during his life, as a young man on a tour of western Europe in 1801 and as a married man and father in 1822, 1825 and 1826. He was clearly affected by the architecture that he saw there. His first foray into designing French style architecture was with the gate lodges at the Silsoe entrance to Wrest Park in 1824, some years before he inherited the estate. In his 1846 letter to his daughter Anne he wrote that:

When I was in Paris in 1822 (I believe) I was very much struck with some of the little summerhouses looking on to the boulevards, and thought that they might be made into very pretty lodges. The park gate to the village at that time was a common white-painted wooden five- barred gate; and the lodge one of the most ordinary rough cast tiled cottages. I took the idea of the present lodges, as I have said; and they looked so well and appropriate when finished that I felt quite confirmed as to the taste and the style of architecture, if ever I built a new house.<sup>231</sup>

This provides evidence that de Grey had made up his mind that he would build in a French style at Wrest at least a decade before he inherited the estate, which, given what we have seen of the architectural context of the early decades of the 19th century, was a break from prevailing tastes. His use of the word “appropriate” is another piece of evidence that his choice was informed by the estate and gardens, that he sought a style suited to the context of what was already there.

The Lodges (see figure 29), mark the western entrance into the estate from the village of Silsoe. Before de Grey built his house, the main approach through the estate was from the north along a tree-lined driveway. De Grey changed the alignment of the main approach to an east-west driveway. This is entered to the west at Silsoe, and passes by the walled garden before approaching the house. The

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<sup>231</sup> A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

change of the Silsoe entrance from secondary to principal was marked with the pair of new lodges and by impressive cast iron gates, painted dark green with gilded details. The Lodges would originally have been very visible from Silsoe's main street and from the church although modern tree planting has somewhat lessened the impact of this view.



Fig 29: North lodge at the Silsoe gate.

The lodges are a matching pair facing each other across the driveway. They are grand in style although modest in scale. They are of two main storeys with a half storey basement. The ground floor level has full height windows with segmented arches. Above these a mansard roof of Welsh slate has smaller, dormer windows, also with segmented arches and with a stone scroll to each side. The roof is topped with a square, central chimney with a modest profile. The main body of the buildings

is of Bath stone with plain banded rusticated dressings. The south lodge has a 20th century extension, but the north lodge remains as it was built.

The lodges do look emphatically French in style in their proportions, details around the windows and above all the mansard roofs and provide an interesting contrast to the nearby church at Silsoe, in whose design de Grey claimed to have a hand and which is Gothic Revival. The church is also appropriate in style to its setting within the village, which is further evidence that de Grey chose the style that he felt was correct for Wrest Park rather than simply indulging a fancy for Frenchness.

Having decided on the type of architecture he would use if he ever built a new house at Wrest he spent time during his next visit to Paris in endeavouring to gain an understanding of the style. In his account of the building of the house he described his attempts to understand and make a record of what he saw during one of his visits to Paris:

In the winter of 1825 when I was at Paris, as you may recollect, we went first to Meurice's Hotel. The salon, the staircase, the long windows were all in the old French style. I tried to copy some of the ornaments; but could not follow the strange and fantastical curves; and I endeavoured to get some architect's clerk or some of the designers for the paper-stainers to copy them for me; but without success.

I spoke to our poor friend Gurwood to endeavour to find me some young architect or at all events to get me a list of French architectural works which might assist me. He did get me some names of books, and with my list in my hand and a pencil and drawing book in my pocket, I started to the Bibliothèque Royale. I was very civilly treated — every book I named was produced; and I was allowed to copy what I pleased. Here were formed the embryo plans of the present place.<sup>232</sup>

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232 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85. The Gurwood mentioned here was perhaps John Gurwood (1790-1845), a Waterloo Veteran and the Duke of Wellington's private secretary, and who lived in Paris during the 1820s.



The references to de Grey's French books have been considered to be proof that he did not design Wrest Park House simply from his own imagination but rather took elements from pattern books and put them together. Indeed he called them his "textbook". This may be partly true for the main house but the Silsoe Gate Lodges were built by de Grey in 1824, the year before he took the trip to Paris during which he visited the Bibliotheque Royale and when he purchased the volumes to which he apparently referred for the design of the main house.

In his own words then, de Grey spent time in Paris looking at French sources in order to inform the design of the house he planned to build when he inherited the estate at Wrest Park. It is tantalising to imagine what sources he interrogated, and in how much detail. One clue might be that three French names are inscribed above the door to the ante library at Wrest.



Fig 30: Detail above door of the ante-library.

The door from the Staircase Hall to the Ante-Library is a segmental arch with a moulded architrave. Both door and architrave are painted and gilded. The door has a plaster sopraporta (see figure 30), painted white with gilded details. It shows a pair of reclining classical figures, one male and one female supporting an oval cartouche containing the tools of an artist and architect including a painters palette, a set square and callipers. The figures are seated amongst a number of books, of which three have names inscribed on the spine. The names are; Blondel, Le Pautre and Mansart. These names are closely associated with French architecture.

What does all this mean? Did de Grey intend that the inclusion of these names would give his house a pedigree, showing that he had knowledge of French

architects and French architectural tradition, or was it a more specific reference?

Were these the architects from whom de Grey took direct influence when designing his house?

Before understanding why de Grey chose these three names it would be useful to discuss exactly to whom he was referring.

### **Blondel, Le Pautre and Mansart.**

There was in fact more than one French architect named Blondel, but only two were prominent. The earlier was François Blondel (1618-1686). He was a diplomat, soldier, civil engineer and architect. He was known as one of the participants in a culture war, opposing the views of Claude Perrault, a close adherent to pure Vitruvian doctrine. Blondel's writings were widely distributed. He is known for his *Cours d'Architecture*, (part one published in 1675 and parts two to six in 1683) in which he promoted classicism and the use of the Classical Orders in what became known as the French classical style. This was an influential piece of writing and was well regarded for many years. He travelled widely and had visited Italy and was familiar with the classical architecture there. From 1671 he was appointed by Louis XIV as Director and Professor of the Academie d'Architecture.

The later Blondel was Jacques François Blondel (Rouen 1705 – Paris 1774), a grandson of François Blondel. Although he was an architect he is known more as a teacher and for his written works on architecture and architectural theory. Not much is known about his education but it is thought that he trained initially under his uncle

Jean François Blondel (1683-1756) who worked as the architect of Rouen, and subsequently under Gilles Marie Oppenord<sup>233</sup> (1672 – 1742) a designer of the French Royal Works and one of the initiators of the Rococo Movement. Jacques François Blondel was well regarded by his contemporaries. He was invited by Diderot and d'Alembert to contribute the section on architecture to the *Encyclopedie*, published in 1751 and added to over many years<sup>234</sup> and he also added later sections on specific areas of architectural theory.

In 1746 he established an independent school of architecture. Although this caused the Academie Royale d'Architecture some discomfort he was regardless still asked to become a Professor at the Academie in 1756. From the students of his own school he demanded total dedication to the study of architecture. The hours of the course were long, continuing well into each evening. This included taking his students to view existing buildings, not least because as was customary for the time it is likely that they worked as his assistants. Although he had a comprehensive knowledge and informed understanding of architectural theory, in practice his work as an architect is not as well regarded as some of his contemporaries. Blondel is best defined as an architectural engraver, draughtsman, theoretician and teacher. He built the Bishop's Palace at Cambrai, the Hotel de Ville and Cathedral Precinct at Metz and designed a layout for Strasbourg, all during the 1760s. Robin Middleton does not believe that they are of strong design and that this can be taken as a sign that Blondel's influence and reputation can instead be attributed to his work as a teacher.

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233 Mary Myers. *French Architectural and Ornament Drawings of the Eighteenth Century*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991) 24.

234 Myers, *French Architectural and Ornament Drawings*, 24.

“His influence as a teacher was enormous; he dominated the world of architectural theory” and his books, “...were eagerly read throughout Europe and for many years were regarded as the soundest repositories of Academic doctrine.”<sup>235</sup> He was a prolific writer, with his works running to many volumes. His key works were; *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance, et de la Decoration des Edifices en General* (1737-38), *L'architecture Françoise* (1752-56), and *Cours d'architecture* (1771-77).

Blondel did not however adhere to the Rococo style. He felt that the freedom of expression and comparative lack of constraint in design of the Rococo ran counter to the philosophical ideals of French classicism to which he adhered. Despite this view, the plates in his books, particularly in *De la Distribution de Maisons de Plaisance*, show that he was not immune to the pressures of fashion and pragmatically introduced Rococo details into his designs. Although he favoured French classicism he was working during the period that marked the apogee of the Rococo Movement and his designs reflect this. He publicly criticised the work of Rococo architects and designers including Pineau, Lajoue and Meissonnier but, “...as Alistair Laing points out, Blondel states in his preface to the first volume of the *Maisons de Plaisance* that Pineau... provided him with some designs for interior decoration, though Blondel did not however identify them on any of the engravings. The strong Rococo nature of Blondel's own designs in the book should therefore not be very surprising despite his denunciations of the style.”<sup>236</sup>

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235 Robin Middleton. “Jacques François Blondel and the Cours d'Architecture”. *Society of Architectural Historians* Vol 18, (1959): 140.

236 Mary Myers. *French Architectural and Ornament Drawings of the Eighteenth Century*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991) 24.

Blondel's design books cover every aspect of country house construction, but he was weaker in the practical elements of construction than in design. De Grey may have taken design elements from Blondel, but in terms of the construction of his building he must have looked elsewhere for knowledge. It was the earlier Blondel, François, who provided more technical detail in his *Cours d'Architecture*. It is possible that de Grey might have used just such instructive texts in his architectural endeavours at Wrest and perhaps in other of his building projects.

The name Le Pautre is also associated with a family of celebrated French designers, engravers, sculptors and architects of the 17th and 18th centuries. Of them the best known architect is Antoine Le Pautre (1621-1679). In common with many of the key architects of 17th century France Le Pautre does not seem to have travelled to Italy. His knowledge of Italian architecture came entirely from prints and drawings. By 1650 Le Pautre already had buildings to his name, including the monastery of Port-Royal and the Hotel de Fontenay Mareuil. In 1652 or 1653 Le Pautre published the *Desseins de Plusieurs Palais*, a volume of engravings of bold architectural designs. Although much admired, he struggled to attract a patron willing to commit to his imaginative, somewhat fantastical style.<sup>237</sup> It was the Hotel de Beauvais that made his name. It was built by Le Pautre for Pierre de Beauvais between 1655 and 1660. It is considered to have been a triumph for Le Pautre, and his most notable success.

Le Pautre was well regarded during his lifetime and beyond, but he is not generally named as one of the most eminent architects of his age. Anthony Blunt however

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<sup>237</sup> Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France 1500 to 1700*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1953), 235.

thought that, “French architectural style of the mid 17th century was formed by Mansart and Le Vau, but among their contemporaries were many artists of considerable talent, who produced work with individual characteristics. The most original of these was Antoine Le Pautre.”<sup>238</sup>

Jean Le Pautre (1618-1682) was the older brother of Antoine. Although not an architect he was well known as a designer and engraver.<sup>239</sup> Prolific and original, his designs were intricate and spirited. He worked at the Gobelins workshop, supplying designs for their tapestries and he also provided designs for Andrea Charles Boulle, the furniture maker who most epitomised the flamboyance and splendour of the court of Louis XIV. Although he cannot have been a source to which de Grey turned for inspiration for the external architecture, his many fantastical engravings contain the baroque and rococo elements with which de Grey embellished his interiors.

Mansart was also the name of two famous French architects. The earlier of the two, François Mansart (1598-1666) is considered to have been at the forefront of French classical architecture and his work is renowned for its subtlety and elegance.

Anthony Blunt named him as being key to the development of architecture in France, “French classical architecture was the creation of three men: Jacques Lemercier, François Mansart, and Louis Le Vau... each made a distinct contribution to the evolution of the style and were to influence their successors for more than a century.”<sup>240</sup>

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238 Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France 1500 to 1700*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1953), 234.

239 Robert Berger, *Antoine Le Pautre, A French Architect of the Era of Louis X*. (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 3.

240 Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France*. 195.

Mansart was trained by his brother-in-law Germain Gaultier, who worked with De Brosse at Rennes. He did not visit Italy and although he demonstrated a sound understanding of the principles of classicism he was not unduly influenced by it, creating instead a French tradition of a very high standard.

Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646 – 1708) was a great nephew of François Mansart with whom he worked while he was young and his early work resembles Mansart's in style.<sup>241</sup> He inherited Mansart's collection of engravings and drawings and re-used some of the designs. He later added Mansart's highly regarded surname to his own. He was responsible for the enlargement of the Palace of Versailles, building the north and south wings as addition to the 1669 garden front designed by Le Vau. Blunt is uncomplimentary about Hardouin Mansart's additions to Le Vau's suggesting that they “destroyed” the varied depths of the façade and that the “scale (was) ruined by the addition of Mansart's vast wings to north and south”.<sup>242</sup>

Unlike the Blondels mentioned here, or Antoine Le Pautre, neither Mansart nor Hardouin-Mansart published volumes of their work or theories. Although their designs and drawings were published in other forms and so might have been available to de Grey, it seems unlikely that he would have bought a volume specific to the work of either architect.

The three names highlighted by de Grey might then have referred to any of the six men described here. All were well known and influential both in their own time and

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241 e.g. The Petit Hotel de Conti. Anthony Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France 1500 to 1700*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1953), 338.

242 Blunt, *Art and Architecture in France*. 334.



over the following decades. It is quite credible to imagine any or all of their names being raised when de Grey began to seek inspiration and guidance in his desire to create a building with 18th century style credentials. To establish which of them, and which of their writings, were used directly by de Grey requires closer examination.

### **Which works of French Architecture did de Grey consult while designing his house at Wrest Park?**

Inscribing the names of Blondel, Mansart and Le Pautre above the door from the staircase hall into the ante-library must be of great significance. It suggests that de Grey felt strongly about the architects and that they were of sufficient importance to his creation that they needed to be commemorated in this way. It is a magnificent piece of decorative work placed in a prominent position within the house. It is above a doorway which forms part of the long view that links the main entrance of the house to the most prominent of the garden features, the Archer Pavilion which at half a mile away is the focal point of the formal garden. Not only is the inscription part of this axial view formed of the house and the pavilion, but it is visible as soon as one enters the staircase hall. The location of this homage is not hidden away, but is on display in a primary position that would be seen by all visitors to the house.

The question is, which of these people, and to which writings was de Grey referring to, both in his tribute above the door and in his written observations? I have closely examined the works available by François and Jacques-François Blondel and Antoine Le Pautre, and have studied engravings by Jean Le Pautre, Mansart and Hardouin-Mansart which are available in other sources in order to identify any direct

parallels with the house at Wrest Park and therefore explain why de Grey named them. Looking at both the internal and external style of the house, it is undeniably French in style, and so at first glance it is easy to find parallels with the designs of all the architects and designers I have studied. This is perhaps an indication of de Grey's success in achieving his aim of using the "taste and the style of architecture"<sup>243</sup> that he had so admired in the garden lodges he saw in Paris. On closer examination though, the house has very few directly similar elements. It resembles a French building as a whole, rather than simply being a collection of distinct elements copied from other buildings. Because of this the question of exactly which books he consulted does not have a straightforward answer.

In the case of Blondel and Mansart it is unclear whether the name relates to a specific member of each family or if it is an acknowledgement of successive generations of French architectural skill. One potential clue would be knowing what sources de Grey had access to. Each of these architects either wrote or contributed to influential books about architecture and we know that during his visit to Paris in 1825 de Grey visited the Bibliothèque National and that he went on the purchase books which he brought back to England:

I was very anxious to buy some of the works, and Gurwood took me to various shops. At one I recollect I saw a folio work in 3 vols. for which the man asked me 600 francs. This was more than I was disposed to give, and we went elsewhere. At length in a shop over the river I met with the same 3 vols., though less well bound. "Eh bien, a combien est ca?" "Ah, je ne peux pas vous le donner a moms [sic] que soixant francs!" and then seeming to think that I might object to the

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243 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

sum, he added “C’est tout plein de gravures!” I brought it and it was my textbook for many a year.<sup>244</sup>

De Grey mentions his French books a number of times in his description of building the house and it is clear that he used them at least as a source of inspiration and at the most as a more direct guide for elements of his designs:

I had my French books always under my hand! referred to them for authority whenever I could find anything to suit me, and doors, shutters, panels, rails etc. were to be found.<sup>245</sup>

It would be helpful to identify the three volumes purchased in 1825. There is no inventory of the library at Wrest during the time of de Grey. The closest reference of the contents of the library is the sale catalogues from the sale of Wrest Park in 1917,<sup>246</sup> which lists the contents of the library at that time. Of the three architects from the ante-library door only one work is listed, which was an edition of Blondel's *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance, et de la Decoration des Edifices en General*. It is listed as being four volumes which does not tie in with de Grey's three volumes, but the listing describes it as being without plates so it may have been rebound without the engravings after de Grey's time.

Jacques François Blondel's *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance* was published in Paris in 1737-38. It was a comprehensive work in which Blondel set out a number of designs for model country houses, including gardens and associated buildings. It included 155 engraved plates in two volumes.

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244 De Grey, “Well now, how much is this?” Bookseller, “Ah, I cannot give that to you for less than 60 francs,... It's filled with engravings throughout”. A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

245 Cirket, “Earl de Grey”, 66-85.

246 Particulars of Wrest Mansion with Grounds, Park, Woodlands and Home Farms, comprising an area of about 1,668 acres. 17 July 1917. AD3237 BARS.

An examination of the plates in Blondel's book reveals many similarities between the plates and the details found at Wrest House. Decorative details from the exterior of the house seem to have a resemblance to some of Blondel's engravings. Although there is not an exact copy it would appear that de Grey took small elements from a number of Blondel's designs and rearranged them in new configurations. The overall effect is that the architectural decorative details, especially those above windows and doors on both the north and south elevations of the main house, would not look out of place in Blondel's book.



Fig 31: Urn on the central dome of the garden front of Wrest House and a detail of Elevation d'une des Façades Laterale du Château from J. F. Blondel's *Maison du Plaisance*. 1737-38. Page 6.

For example, the urn on the roof of the main house at Wrest, braced between a pair of scrolls at the pinnacle of the central dome above the principal pavilion on the garden front, looks very similar indeed to that which can be seen on one of the plates illustrating the first house design in *Maisons de Plaisance*.<sup>247</sup> The central flattened domes would appear to have the same silhouette as those from the illustrations of the second house design (see figure 31). This design has a similar rhythm and scale to Wrest Park and it would be easy to say that if not this specific example, then the

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247 J. F. Blondel. *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance, et de la Decoration des Edifices en General* (Paris: Charles-Antoine Jombert, 1737). Elevation d'une des Façades Laterale du Château.

general style of J. F. Blondel's designs, were of a direct source of inspiration for de Grey.

The metalwork of the railings around the upper gardens and the Terrace, and those of the balconies of the house also show similarities to designs in Blondel. De Grey confirmed that he had used his French books to aid him in these designs, but that they were not exact copies:

The iron railings both on the terrace and at the lower end of the French garden and upon the balconies of the house are derived (not copied) from my darling 60 franc French books.<sup>248</sup>

The interior of the house also contains details that are comparable to designs from *Maisons de Plaisance*. The metalwork of the double branched staircase in the Staircase Hall was a source of pride for de Grey and he considered it to be “peculiar”.<sup>249</sup> However, it is the design of this metalwork which of all the architectural and decorative details of de Grey's house, most closely resembles a Blondel design. It is very clearly a close representation of the metalwork illustrated as *Rampes d'Escalier a Grandes Panneaux avec Pilasters* (see figure 32).<sup>250</sup>

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248 A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

249 “The banister of the stairs took a deal of time and trouble and cost a mint of money, but it is very peculiar and I think very striking.” A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85. Although the word peculiar was by this time used to describe something strange, the context here suggests the more nuanced meaning of it being different and special.

250 J. F. Blondel. *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance, et de la Decoration des Edifices en General* (Paris: Charles-Antoine Jombert 1737-38).



Fig 32: Left; the ornate metalwork on the staircase at Wrest House, which has a strong resemblance to the lower of the two designs by J.F. Blondel on the right. *Maisons du Plaisance*, 1737-38. Pg 58.

In addition to specific similarities with engravings in *Maisons de Plaisance* de Grey's house at Wrest follows some of the more general recommendations given by Blondel in his book. In Blondel's architectural theory the composition of a building was based around “*une forme pyramidale*”. A number of elements of a building were placed to each side of a larger central element, perhaps a pavilion, hence looking vaguely pyramidal in shape. This central aspect was not always of a grand scale, but needed to be strong enough to be the focal point of the overall composition. This was rather a plain elevation blueprint and Blondel evidently realised that taken to extreme might result in rather bland looking buildings. To this end he prescribed that the plan and silhouette should be varied enough to make the building look interesting.<sup>251</sup> Although the house at Wrest undeniably has “*une forme pyramidale*” with a central pavilion, neither the plan nor the silhouette has much variety rather an overall feeling of

251 Robin Middleton. “Jacques François Blondel and the Cours d'Architecture,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 18, (1959): 145.

restrained orderliness. Blondel's designs tended to be slightly more embellished than what was achieved by de Grey at Wrest. Sculpture and ornamental embellishments were the key, Blondel believed, to give a building the correct character for its size, status and function.

For Blondel, as with many architects, another absolute essential for successful architecture was symmetry. De Grey certainly used this as a principle in the main house, even balancing the dining room with a cunningly designed conservatory, but once away from the main house the offices, service wing and walled garden break the overall symmetrical order. The symmetry at Wrest could indicate that de Grey took inspiration from the designs in Blondel's *Maisons de Plaisance*, but it might also indicate that de Grey had not entirely shaken off the previous generation of architect's love of Palladianism, which was of course identifiable by a strict adherence to symmetry.

When comparing details of the house with illustrations from *Maisons de Plaisance* it would appear that there are sufficient similarities to be able to say with some confidence that this was one of de Grey's "darling" French books. He wrote of having purchased three volumes. Was this a three volume binding of *Maisons de Plaisance* or were the volumes by different writers? One clue is that a detail which de Grey singles out as having been inspired by his French books, the frames for the large family portraits in the Staircase Hall,<sup>252</sup> do not have any obvious source in *Maisons de Plaisance*. If the inspiration for the frames was taken from one of the 60-franc

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<sup>252</sup> "The (frames) are designed from some of the ornaments in the 60-franc books bought at Paris," A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

books then it is not immediately clear that this book was Blondel's. This suggests that de Grey's books consisted of more than just one work.

The French garden (now known as the French Parterre) has until recently been laid out to a design that was believed to be a simplified version of de Grey's original.

Over the years, dwindling numbers of gardeners at Wrest led to the simplification of some areas of the Upper Gardens (the French Parterre and the Italian Garden), and the complete removal of others such as the Rose Garden. De Grey's sketched design for an elaborate French Garden still exists but it was not known if it was an accurate record of what was actually created in the 19th century. During the autumn of 2011 English Heritage commissioned a full archaeological investigation of the area prior to an accurate restoration of the 1830s scheme. What was discovered was startling in its clarity. Some of the existing box hedges are thought to be original as although they are small they have large root balls. Once the turf was removed from the rest of the Parterre area it was revealed that the earliest beds had been edged in white gravel, which was clearly seen as an archaeological deposit. Due to this it has been possible not only to restore the garden with great accuracy and confidence, but it has provided a clear image of the original design to compare to the designs in *Maisons de Plaisance* which has a series of parterre garden designs which bear a resemblance to the simplified 20th century scheme (see figure 33). It was to be hoped that the discovery of greater detail might pin the design down to Blondel. In reality the revealed details show that the French garden at Wrest has only a superficial resemblance to Blondel's designs with none of the finer details, like the husk garlanding, having a parallel. In detail the French garden at Wrest seems to



owe as much to the work of Le Nôtre at Vaux-le-Vicomte as it does to Blondel. Again this might suggest that de Grey's three books consisted of more than Blondel.



Fig 33: Left, de Grey's undated sketch of a French style garden which has the feel of Blondel's designs, right, the original garden scheme as revealed through archaeological excavation in 2011, which does not appear to closely resemble either de Grey's design or any of Blondel's.

Perhaps this is a suitable place to consider the question of what exactly makes de Grey's house at Wrest look French and in particular of a late 17th to early 18th century style. Seeking comparisons with works by influential French architects of the time, such as Le Vau, Hardouin-Mansart and Jacques-François Blondel, is instructive in both the similarities and differences which become apparent. As discussed, the house that de Grey built has more in common in style with the overall feel of Louis XIV buildings than anything else that was being designed in England at

the time. It is the details that make it so, rather than being a wholesale copy of anything that I have been able to identify in my study of French houses of the period. The Louis XIV style is generally highly ornamented, but Wrest is actually a rather plain building, with baroque and rococo flourishes giving the impression of the French style. These details appear to have been designed specifically for Wrest Park, but have an overall resemblance in particular to designs in J. F. Blondel's book. For example, the ornament above the windows on the garden elevation are strongly evocative of various elements of Blondel but in some cases are simpler and less embellished and in others they appear to take an idea as a starting point. The simple but emphatically French style scallop topped scroll that are above the windows of the garden front take elements from Blondel's illustrations for page 49 of *Maison du Plaisance*<sup>253</sup> (see figure 34) while the floral flourishes that surround the face of a child in the scrolled embellishments above the Conservatory windows are suggestive of Blondel's design for an internal door decoration (see figure 35).<sup>254</sup> In each of these examples the designs are exclusive to de Grey but with signs of his use of Blondel's book as inspiration.

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253 J. F. Blondel. *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance, et de la Decoration des Edifices en General* (Paris: Charles-Antoine Jombert, 1737-38), 49.

254 Blondel. *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance*. 75.

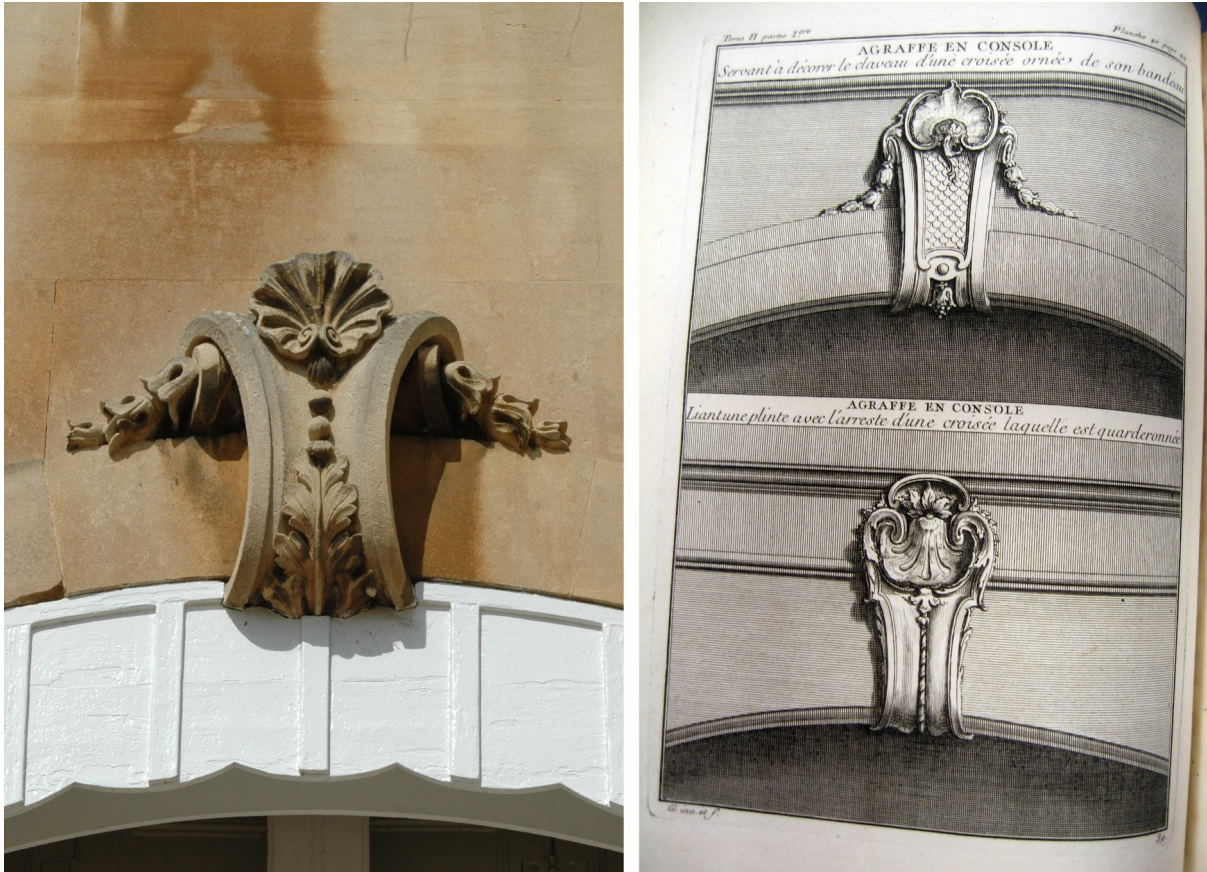


Fig 34: Left, detail above one of the south elevation windows compared to designs on the right from J. F. Blondel's *Maison du Plaisance*. 1737-38. Pg. 49.





Fig 35: Above left, detail above conservatory window, below left inset detail from J. F. Blondel's *Maison du Plaisance*, 1737-38, pg. 75.



Fig 36: The garden front and one of the elevation designs for the second house in J. F. Blondel's *Maison de Plaisance*. 1737-38. Pg. 110.

In proportion and in the rhythm of the bay and pavilions Wrest house carries a resemblance to the houses in Blondel's *Maison du Plaisance* (see figure 36).

Although de Grey's house has a continuous roofline, taking in the end pavilions, which are of only a single bay, rather than the double bay in the example, the overall impression is of a French house in the style of Blondel.

In trying therefore to understand what inspired de Grey to inscribe the names of Blondel, Le Pautre and Mansart above the door to the Ante-Library there does not seem to be a simple answer. He was clearly influenced by the writings of more than one architect, and the parallels between his designs and those of Blondel, along with the fact that in 1917 there was a copy of *Maisons de Plaisance* in the library at Wrest which was most probably purchased by de Grey in 1825, would seem to confirm this. The names represent some of the most important and influential French architects of the 17th and 18th centuries and it is quite believable that when de Grey requested from his friend Gurwood a list of works to which he might refer, that these were the names put forward. By displaying the three names in his house de Grey was declaring that he held great respect for French architects and that he was not abashed to link his work to theirs. It is perhaps only surprising that de Grey limited himself to naming only three architects. It seems strange that he did not name Le Vau or Lemercier. Is this another clue to the authors of de Grey's French volumes? Perhaps he named only those architects from whose works he took direct reference or perhaps it was simply that three is a balanced number, fewer names would not have given weight to the French theme and more would seem like a list.

## **Why was French style used more commonly for interior décor than exterior architecture?**

The French style was more commonly used in interiors in the 18th and 19th centuries and we must consider why this should be so. The exterior of a gentleman's home can perhaps be looked upon as his public face, an expression of the persona by which he wishes to be perceived. Inside the building there is a mixture of spaces that are 'public' and 'private', and also a mixture of functions which makes it more practical to have a variety of styles. In many houses it seems to have been not just practical, but desirable to have a range of styles represented by the interiors. This was perhaps a way to demonstrate an easy familiarity with more than one fashion, with variety being a shorthand for learning and experience, rather than being constrained to a single stylistic theme.

The age of the house might have an effect on the dominant style of the exterior. An aged house speaks volumes about the status of the family, and of a long connection with the estate and with the land. Single phase rebuilds of country houses are far from unheard of, but much more usual is a house with a core that has stood for centuries. The overall effect of the exterior might have a piecemeal accretion of different styles, rather than an overarching and cohesive design. Even the celebrated Versailles front at Boughton House in Northamptonshire is an addition to a typical 16th century English H-plan building with a great hall at its heart.<sup>255</sup> There are a number of reasons why a country house owner might have decided to make changes to their house. A major and overbearing fashion can turn even the most

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<sup>255</sup> Earl of Dalkeith et al. Boughton, *The English Versailles*. (The English Heritage Group, 2006), 18.

prosaic head, as can the influences of travel and newly broadened horizons. Public office or an injection of cash into the family coffers perhaps from a marriage settlement might also facilitate major remodelling. A change in the fortune or status of a family could also lead to the desire to improve the family home. Indeed, this final reason must be considered in relation to de Grey and Wrest, when one contemplates his status as County Lieutenant.

Interior spaces are easier to change than the exterior. They afford more flexibility and allow for private expressions of individuality not otherwise considered suitable for the public face of the building and by association, the owner. Inside the house there is the freedom to decorate rooms in a mixture of styles. They won't look strange or ill-considered in the way that a muddled exterior would. In the case of venerable old buildings given entirely new façades the internal rooms can be a way of maintaining a sense of the age of the house, whilst also allowing for new fashions to be displayed.

In his 1865 manual of country house building, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, from the Parsonage to the Palace*, Robert Kerr described an ideal for the style of the dining room. He wrote that:

...so far as forms, colours, and arrangements can produce such a result, the whole appearance of the room ought to be that of masculine importance.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, from the Parsonage to the Palace; With Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans*. (London: John Murray, 1865), 94.





Fig 37: The Countess's sitting room, created for Henrietta Countess de Grey.

The idea that the dining room should be masculine was presumably not an alien one to de Grey. The dining room that he designed at Wrest Park adopts a heavier decorative style than any of the other rooms and can be considered to be 'masculine' in style. By contrast, the Countess's Sitting Room (see figure 37) at the other end of the house, designed for Countess de Grey by her husband, uses much more typically 'feminine' decorative *motifs* such as plump little cupids, suspended from the ceiling, and tiny gilded shelves around the mirrors on which she could display her collection of porcelain birds. The idea that rooms could have an appearance pertaining to one or the other gender is easy to imagine. The idea can perhaps be applied to whole buildings. The fact that Kerr singles out the dining room as a masculine space (note the use of the word 'masculine', rather than as a description



of a room for the use of 'gentlemen') suggests that interiors might be considered as naturally feminine spaces. The home was after all the domain of wives, mothers, daughters and sisters, particularly during the first half of the 19th century. The more general acceptance for French style interiors than exteriors might be interpreted as an unacknowledged view that French style was intrinsically feminine. This would make de Grey's choice even more remarkable, a very public expression of an acceptance for the more feminine styles. If his desire to build a new house was tied to his desire to create a building that was a fitting addition to the already established gardens he may have chosen a French style to be in accord with the major styles found within the gardens. However, gardens are often associated with the feminine and perhaps his choice was partly in response to this. If the garden is to be seen as intrinsically feminine, then what better style to adopt than the feminine 18th century French?

### **Section 3. Description of the House and Associated Buildings.**

Having looked at de Grey's motivations behind designing and building a new house for his estate at Wrest Park, it is useful to look in more detail at his creation.

#### **Entrance, drive and walled garden.**

From the moment the visitor to Wrest Park passes through the entrance between the Silsoe Gate Lodges there can be no mistake regarding the scale and overall style of the property they announce. The gate lodges are as we have seen unmistakably

French in style. De Grey used the building of this pair of lodges in 1825 to test his notion of creating a style of architecture at Wrest Park that came to him during his travels in Paris. They do not have any obvious design sources within the French books I have examined, but in proportion and spirit they are undeniably an homage to 18th century French country house architecture, with their mansard roof silhouette and casket-like overall proportions. Not only did they serve as a test for the overall style for de Grey's house, but they also provide a complete break from the domestic architecture of the village. Although modest in size, the gate lodges give a great sense of arrival.

The drive follows west to east, along the north side of the vast brick walls of the walled kitchen garden. The wall tops were originally decorated with a carved stone urn on the pier between each bay. The layout today is generally unchanged from de Grey's design.<sup>257</sup> Within the outer walls the garden is sub-divided. Of the two main compartments the eastern was used for the cultivation of flowers, fruit and vegetables. This compartment is now the location of the English Heritage entrance building, café and children's play area. The main western compartment, which is now further sub-divided into a works yard and visitor parking originally held the extensive glass houses and service buildings of which the range of bothies survive. The narrow eastern compartment was an area for ornamental planting and a pear orchard. This would have been intended as an impressive and beautiful introduction to the walled garden when entered from the Great Garden. The long compartment on the southern side, now also used for car parking would have been used for fruit cultivation. The

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<sup>257</sup> Wrest Park Conservation Management Plan, Gazetteer G; Dr. Twigs Way, The Landscape, English Heritage, 2005, X967/1/5/1. 44. BARS.

small compartment on the western side housed the pump and the frames and pits required for more tender plants and for producing out of season stock for the table. At the height of their productivity these gardens would have provided food not only for the household at Wrest Park, but also would have produced enough to be sent to other residences such as the house at St James's Square when the family were there.

What makes the walled garden unusual is that it formed part of the overall building scheme and is stylistically cohesive with the house. Visitors to the house would first have passed the imposing walls and gates of the walled garden which, in addition to impressing upon them the size and grandeur of the estate, also continued the introduction to the French style of the main house, which was shielded from immediate view by the double avenue of elm trees. These trees were retained from the layout of the approach to the old house. By inserting his new house into the avenue of mature elm trees de Grey cleverly gave it the appearance of having sat in the landscape for many years. The high quality of the walls, piers and gateways would have impressed upon the visitor the overall status, wealth and above all taste of de Grey. As Twigs Way observed:

Its placement and architectural unity with the house marks it as an unusually fine example of the Victorian fashion for productive gardens as status symbols.<sup>258</sup>

The gardeners house on the north-west corner of the walled garden is of two storeys with a deep mansard roof with dormer at attic level (see figure 38). It is a striking building and quite grand. The position of head gardener had, by the 1830s, become

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<sup>258</sup> Wrest Park Conservation Management Plan, Gazetteer G; Dr. Twigs Way, The Landscape, English Heritage, 2005, X967/1/5/1. 44. BARS.

one of prestige and this is perhaps reflected in the choice of a French style to match the main house. It is also of a piece with the large walls of the garden, providing coherence with the overall style. As with the gate lodges, the gardener's house is reminiscent of designs by the architects named in the house, but does not appear to be directly informed by a single previously existing design or building. Again, this demonstrates that de Grey was using his own interpretation of how a French style walled garden and attached buildings might look, rather than taking a design wholesale from one of his French books. To the south western corner of the walled garden is Coachman's Cottage, which is less visible from the drive. It is modest and plain and clearly not intended as a stylistic partner to the Gardener's House. This might have been a reflection either of the status of the intended tenant, but might also have provided a cost saving. Although de Grey did not appear to cut corners in his pursuit of French style, nor did he see the need for an ornate building that was out of sight of his visitors.



Fig 38: Gardener's House.

The walled garden has a hierarchy of gates, with the central Eagle Gate being the most imposing. It has rusticated stone piers and a segmental head with decorative keystones. A large eagle, with half folded wings, holds a fruit laden vine in its beak, an indication of the fecundity beyond. When looking through the French sources listed earlier in this chapter, it is easy to find similarities between the designs for ornate details such as the monumental statuary tableaux which adorn all of the principal gates along within the park, particularly in J. F. Blondel's *Maisons du Plaisance*, but there is no single design to match. De Grey seems to have taken the designs as an inspiration or a starting point but not as a pattern to copy. De Grey

either re-used statues from elsewhere in the gardens or purchased new pieces from contemporary sculptors and they appear to have been carefully selected to give the overall impression of the types of designs in the J. F. Blondel books.

Within the walled garden itself there are a number of original gates and gate openings. Many have subsequently been altered and widened in order to accommodate 20th century agricultural equipment. Of the remaining original gates only a couple retain their original urn finials, a rather grand addition to the gate piers of a productive garden.

### **Ceres Gate and Strangers Gate.**

The main gate giving access between the great garden and the walled garden is known as Ceres Gate and it is here that de Grey gives full attention to setting out his ambition for the house and gardens. The full height double gate would have been the entrance through which de Grey brought guests from the formal gardens into the productive gardens, in order to impress them. Ceres Gate is decorated with a reclining statue on a large plinth (see figure 39). It is a dominating feature and feels a little out of proportion with the gate below. The plinth is mostly undecorated with a few small rococo scrolls to the side. The central figure is actually a Coade stone naiad but here she is re-attributed as Ceres, an ancient Roman goddess of agriculture and fertility. Although she now reclines over an urn overflowing with flowers it is probable that she once resided in a more watery location, with the urn flowing with water. Davies<sup>259</sup> suggested that the statue had been purchased from the

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259 J. Davies, *Garden Ornaments at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire 1700-1917*, *Wrest Park Conservation Plan*, English Heritage, 2009. X967/1/16. 210. BARS.

Coade artificial stone manufactory in 1799, by the Earl of Hardwicke. The original location is unknown but Hardwicke commissioned a number of water features in the gardens at Wrest Park, notably the Bath House and associated garden and it is possible that the naiad was positioned in that area. A panel beneath Ceres has the inscription:

These gardens were enlarged and decorated by Thomas Philip Earl de Grey in the year 1836.



Fig 39: Ceres Gate.

Not only did de Grey value the gardens to the extent that he designed his house as a direct response to them, but he felt inspired to make his own additions to them and to record and celebrate them with a prominent inscription. In some ways the inscription is misleading, positioned as it is above the entrance to the walled gardens. His enlargements to the gardens lay elsewhere, in the Evergreen Garden, the Orangery and in other removals and additions carried out under him. The walled garden was an entirely new construction on a site unrelated to the location of the old

kitchen gardens which had been outside of the main gardens, to the west of the old house.

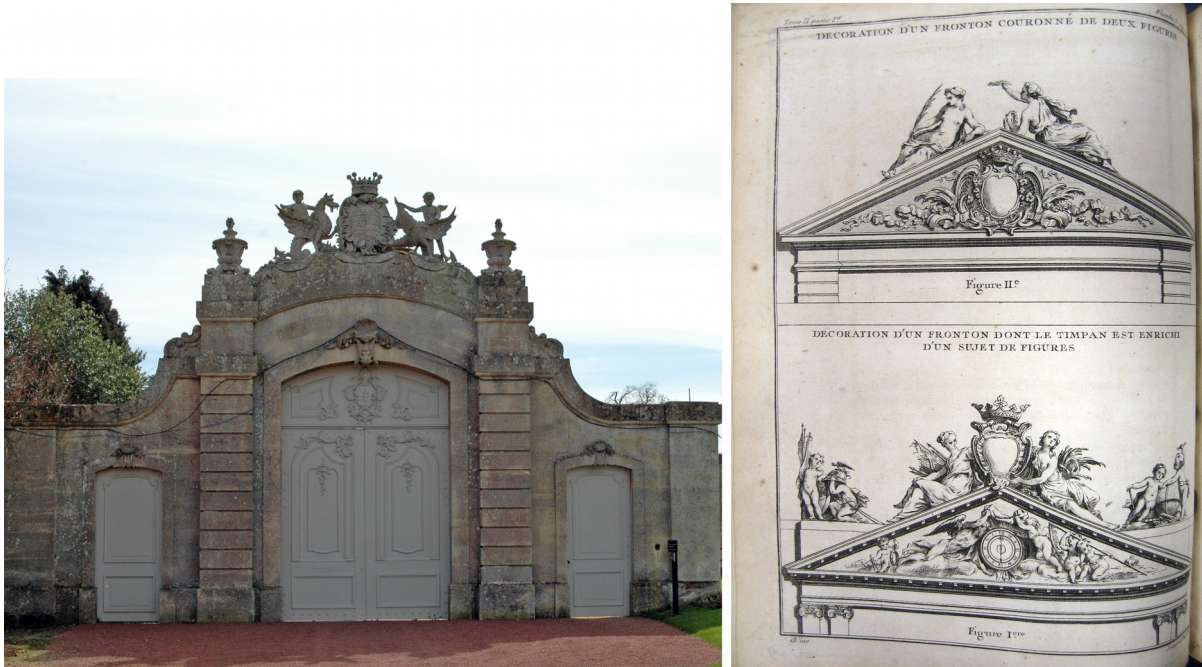


Fig 40: Left; Stranger's Gate, Wrest Park, Bottom right; a design for a pediment from Blondel's *Maison du plaisir*. 1737-38. Pg. 43. De Grey commissioned the decoration above Stranger's Gate, to his own design, but following the general style seen in Blondel's book.

The gardens can be entered to one side of the walled garden via Stranger's Gate. It is monumental in scale and style and is decorated with a rococo scroll and acanthus leaves (see figure 40). The north facing decorative sculptures that sit on the top of the gate are a pair of wyverns, each with a child standing with them. Between them is a cartouche with the de Grey family coat of arms, complete with coronet. Below the wyverns feet a carved ribbon is draped, with the family motto "FOY EST TOUT".<sup>260</sup> The group is signed on the back of one of the children by the artist, W. Kelsey 1838. Again, this tableau does not have a direct parallel in J. F. Blondel or

<sup>260</sup> Translates as "Faith is all".



any of the other sources I have examined, but it is very much in the style of Blondel's designs and might also be considered to have a resemblance to some of Jean Le Pautre's engravings.

Along the length of the north facing wall, each pier was topped with a carved stone urn, for the most part now lost. Overall, the long approach alongside the walled garden, with its occasional rococo flourishes and a glimpse of the mansard roof of the mansion beyond, gives an appropriate and imposing introduction to the house and gardens. After Stranger's Gate one almost immediately reaches the north front of the house. Visitors today cannot see the house until they are directly adjacent to it on the drive due to a pair of large shrubberies, one to each side of the front elevation, but when the house was first built these did not exist and so the house would have been visible as one travelled along the drive.

## The north elevation.

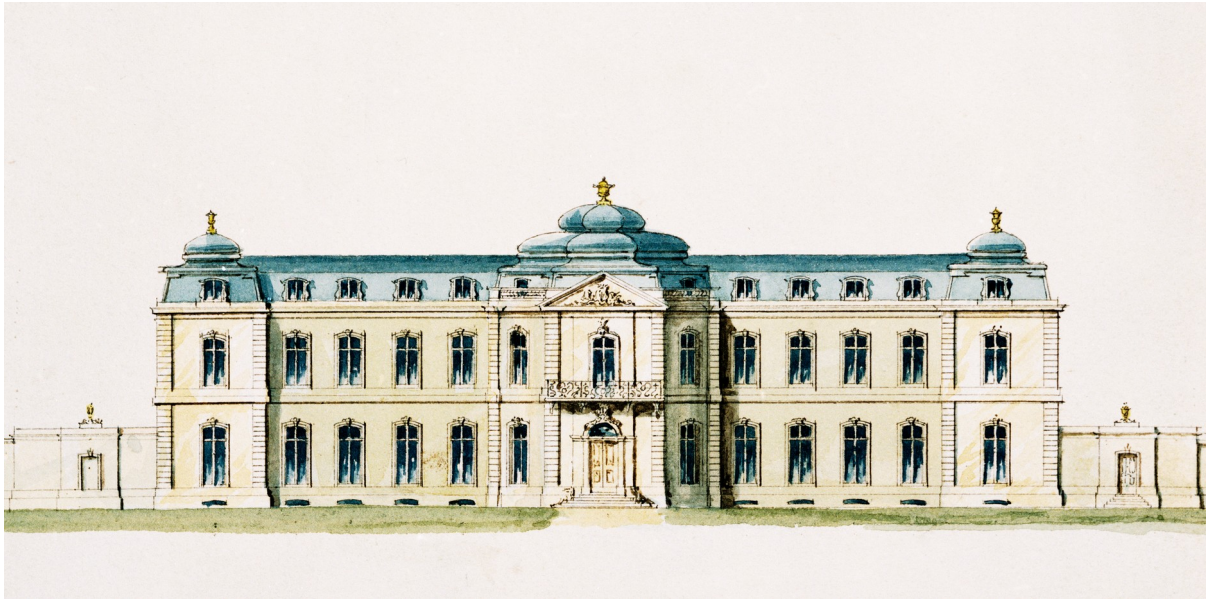


Fig 41: Undated design drawing of north elevation, by Earl de Grey © English Heritage.

The Silsoe Gate lodges and Gardener's House provide an indication of the overall style at Wrest Park, but nonetheless the impact of first viewing the north front of the house is undiminished, as can be seen in an undated drawing by de Grey (see figure 41). As previously discussed, the house is without parallel in England and makes a strong visual impact. The drive continues as a straight road from west to east, with a semi-circular drive sweep extending southwards from it to meet the main entrance on the north front of the house. The area enclosed by the drive sweep is lawned, and the areas directly adjacent to the house are paved with York Stone slabs.

The house has a symmetrical plan form running east to west from the central pavilion but also from north to south in that it has a double pile formation. It is principally of two storeys with a basement and attic rooms within a Welsh slate mansard roof. De Grey used closely jointed Bath stone ashlar dressings, v-jointed

with plain quoins. He had wanted to use one of the newly invented artificial stones, claiming that there was no good building stone to be quarried locally, but perhaps as an example of occasional enthusiasm for new technologies. It was not to be. As he wrote in his letter to his daughter:

As there is no stone in that country, I was induced to adopt the artificial stone for which a Mr Ranger had a patent. I had him down; all our gravel, lime etc. etc.. Were submitted to his inspection and it was resolved to build the offices with it. We had a foreman of his to superintend; and every thing was done selon les regles. It had its objections, but I resisted all my clerks of works etc., telling them that their objections were prejudices; but alas! After it had been up some months and wet and frost began to set in, I was forced to acknowledge that it was a delusion; and we were forced to pull down what had not crumbled of itself.

Bath stone was then the only material; and from that moment for more than two years I had two stone wagons and ten horses bringing stone from Leighton every day but Sundays.<sup>261</sup>

The north façade has three projecting pavilions, each with a leaded domed roof. That of the central pavilion is in the form of a large, flattened onion dome. The north front is of thirteen bays. The windows are now a mixture of sashes and casement. The original windows had gilded glazing bars, a French style flourish that must have further increased the sense of style and opulence when the house was first built. The north front windows have segmented headed openings with decorative carved keystones. A small number of these are false windows. The ovoid central pavilion contains the main entrance, with an arched doorway beneath a first floor balcony and pediment at mansard level upon which is the de Grey's coronet and the family coat of arms. The door is flanked by a pair of Carrara marble statues on Portland stone pedestals, one of the Diana de Gabies and one of an Amazon. It seems likely

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<sup>261</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

that they were purchased by Earl de Grey from Vicente Livvi with whom he was corresponding in 1839.<sup>262</sup> He probably used a London agent to assist in the sale. In his letter to his daughter he wrote:

These statues are from C. I had an interview with their agent in London to learn the prices, and to settle what they were to be; and I had some difficulty in selecting appropriate subjects. They had very few models except muses and such sort of cattle, tall stiff women in marble petti-coats as stiff as an iceberg, with a very large, coarse and ill-carved great toe peeping out at the bottom, which did not suit my notions. However, at last we selected the present, which do very fairly for an outdoor position on a north front.<sup>263</sup>

The Diana statue is a loose, reduced sized copy of the Diana of Gabies, a classical Greco-Roman statue. It was on display in the Louvre from 1820, having been purchased by Napoleon after its discovery in Gabii near Rome in 1792. The other statue, of an Amazon, is also a loose copy of an antique, thought to be that of a wounded Amazon in the Museo Pio Clementino in the Vatican, of which there are a number of variations.<sup>264</sup> They are purely decorative, with no allusions to de Grey beyond his sense of grandeur as they are quite large and imposing.

The north front is illuminated by a set of six cast iron lamp posts on Portland stone pedestals. The de Grey correspondence from the time of the building of the house lists a number of cast metal items, all from Barwell and Hagger of the Eagle Foundry in Northampton and it seems likely that this is where the lamps and posts came from. Davies points out the similarity of the Wrest Park lamps to some in the 1865 Barwell

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<sup>262</sup> Earl de Grey correspondence, L30/10/29. BARS.

<sup>263</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

<sup>264</sup> J. Davies, *Garden Ornaments at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire 1700-1917*, Wrest Park Conservation Plan, English Heritage, 2009. X967/1/16. 210. BARS.

and Co. catalogue.<sup>265</sup> The lamps and posts were included in the building expenditure accounts of 1834-40<sup>266</sup> so it seems likely that they were in position by 1840, around the same time as the statues. Two of the lamps are at the top of the rococo balustrade of the entrance staircase, further enhancing the grandeur of the entrance.

### **The south elevation.**

The south elevation is similar to the north front, with the three protruding pavilions visible from this side. It looks wider though, with fifteen bays instead of the thirteen bays on the north front. This is due to the flat façade of the central pavilion which is not as wide as its curved sibling on the front of the house. Unlike the north front the windows all have metal balconettes or balconies. The blind boxes, originally painted in stripes of off-white and dark green, remain although the external blinds do not. The glazing bars were originally gilded, which combined with the striped blinds must have given a palatial feel. Gilded glazing bars were used to great effect in 18th century high status French architecture, most notably at Versailles.

The conservatory, at the western end of the house, is cleverly designed to look like a cohesive part of the rest of the house and is balanced out on the eastern side by the dining room. At pediment level is a group of cupids with garlands of flowers, which were executed by Carew, a sculptor employed by de Grey.

The west façade of the house faces the walled garden and provides the first glimpse of the house as one progresses down the driveway. While being entirely true to the

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<sup>265</sup> J. Davies, *Garden Ornaments at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire 1700-1917*, *Wrest Park Conservation Plan*, English Heritage, 2009. X967/1/16. 210. BARS.

<sup>266</sup> *Wrest Park building accounts*, X219/1 BARS.

18th century French style of the rest of the house it has a character of its own. The north west and south west pavilions mark each end, each with two bays and separated by three bays. It is two storey with an additional mansard attic storey. The pavilions have a slate mansard roof topped with a squat lead dome and the central range has a stone façade to the mansard, carved with rococo scroll work. To the south west side of this elevation the Conservatory breaks the symmetry in a very pleasing way. Tucked in the junction of the house and conservatory a small staircase leads down to a door which gives direct access to the basement level. The conservatory had a dedicated heating system to which this door also gives close access. The overall impression of this elevation is rather lighter and more feminine than the north and south fronts and is perhaps a reflection that this wing housed Lady de Grey's dressing room and her Sitting Room and Conservatory. It has a visual completeness that could be mistaken for a principal front of a smaller house rather than a secondary façade of a larger building. It faces on to what is now known as the Italian Garden, part of a cohesive scheme designed, it seems, as being expressly for the pleasure of Lady de Grey (see figure 24).

### **Exterior of the service range and stables.**

Moving further eastwards along the drive one comes almost immediately to the service range, and then the stables. The walled garden, main house, service range and stables combine to present an unbroken façade of great length. In arranging his buildings in a linear manner de Grey was able to maximise the impact of his house and associated buildings, combining them to give the impression of immense size,

which would not have been achieved had he broken up the arrangement with more remote locations for the walled garden and stables as is sometimes seen in English country houses.

Although the buildings are constructionally connected, the service range makes a break with the French style encountered thus far. They are built in a plain English classical style and are unmistakably domestic. The principal west end of the range, adjoined to the main house by a very plain wing, is of undecorated York stone ashlar with plain banded dressings with plain v-joints. A pair of small lodges flank an undecorated gateway into the clock tower courtyard. The porter's lodge is of a modest two storey construction with a shallow pitched, four-faced roof of slate topped with a slender stone urn (see figure 42).



Fig 42: Porter's lodge at the entrance to the service range.

Once past the main service gate the material changes to a more pedestrian yellow brick laid in Flemish bond. The façade of the service range, which faces the driveway, is of two storeys and originally had undistinguished small paned windows, is fiercely plain, especially after the rococo details of the main house and garden. Internally though, the range is more interesting, with a varied and unsymmetrical plan. The clock tower, with a decorative carved stone cupola incorporates the clock from the old house and has a large stone plaque commemorating the date on which de Grey laid the first foundation stone.

Adjoining the service range to the east are the large stables. Although not entirely consistent in style with the walled garden and main house they have much more of a



French feel than the service range. Arranged in three wings enclosing a courtyard on three sides, they are entered through a central carriage gate with segmented head, carved stone keystone with de Grey's coronet amongst swags of foliage and elaborately moulded gates. In an echo of the main house it has three pavilions, with the gate in the more prominent central one, and mansard roofs. The style of the arch and the roofline make it altogether more French in style than the functionally plain service range. The stables might possibly have been seen by visitors to the house, whilst the service wing was certainly not intended to be seen. This is reflected in the slightly grander, and French, style of the stables as opposed to the unprepossessing plainness of the service areas.



Fig 43: The entrance to the stables.

De Grey built his house at Wrest Park, along with the walled garden, service range, stables and other ancillary buildings in a single phase, over the space of only five years. He laid the foundation stone in February 1834 and the family moved in in October 1839. It is an astonishing achievement to build such a vast complex of buildings in a relatively short space of time. The northern façade of Wrest Park, approached along the main west-east driveway was designed as a coherent whole. On the approach to the house the architecture is French in style. The materials used are of fine quality and the scale is grand. This most public facing part of de Grey's scheme must have been designed largely to give an impression of size. Once past the house we reach the service area, which while large and rather fine, was not an area intended to be viewed closely by visitors, and its style announces its purpose. The stables, again not part of a formal visitor area were nonetheless an important part of most 19th century country houses and the French refrain in the architectural style anchored them to the rest of the de Grey's high status new buildings.

At the eastern end of the house is the service range. The south facing elevation housed offices including the Stewards Room, Housekeepers Room and Still Room. These are large rooms, with a garden view, and would have mainly been used by the higher status servants. Compared to the house to which it is attached, the south elevation of the Service Range is almost completely unadorned. Faced in Bath Stone, this elevation is of two storeys, with sash windows, the central three of which have subdued scroll work on the pediments. Above these central windows is a sculpture of the reclining figure of a boy with his hand atop a small cornucopia. The sculpture is similar in character to the Carew sculptures on the rest of the South

Elevation and so it is not unreasonable to attribute the Service Range sculpture to Carew as well. The Clock Tower in the courtyard behind this range can be seen at roof level, which relieves an otherwise unremarkable part of the house. It seems that de Grey wished for his house to be architecturally noteworthy, but his Service Range to be almost invisible. In his description of the house in a letter to his daughter he goes into great detail about many aspects of the house but does not mention the Service Range at all.

### **The Petit Trianon.**

To the south-east of the house, tucked away behind the Dairy, is the Petit Trianon. It is a small rustic building, in a 'Swiss Cottage' style. It was built in 1856 by Earl de Grey. It has long been supposed to have been built for his grandchildren, as a play house. It might also have had educational purposes, teaching the children the rudiments of cooking, joinery and household management. This may be true in part but Twigs Way observed that there was an enthusiasm at that time for small rustic garden buildings as an enhancement to the landscape:

This was related to the fashion for Rustic, particularly promoted by the designer Shirley Hibberd in his 'Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste' (1856). Although the fashion was perhaps predominantly taken up by the middle and lower upper classes, upper class and royal examples also include the Swiss Cottage at Osborne House (built 1853-4).<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Wrest Park Conservation Management Plan, Gazetteer G; Dr. Twigs Way, The Landscape, English Heritage, 2005, X967/1/5/1. 120. BARS.



Fig 44: The Petit Trianon.

It is a small building of rusticated logs on a brick plinth. Decorative barge boards completed the illusion of a 'Swiss' cottage (see figure 44). Internally it has a brick floor and three rooms, probably originally fitted as a kitchen and sitting rooms. It is interesting that the building is now known as the Petit Trianon. It is unlikely that this was the name given to the building originally, and represents rather the 20th century mis-understanding of de Grey as a Francophile. What the cottage actually shows is de Grey's interest in garden fashions and perhaps an admiration for and emulation of the royal household at Osborne House.



### **Cain Hill lodge.**

To the east of the upper garden is Cain Hill Lodge. This gate lodge was once an important entrance to the gardens, giving access from the Whitehill and Braybury lodges, at the south and north of the estate. It is cohesive in style with the Service Range and most likely dates from the same time. Unlike the French style lodges at the Silsoe gates, the Cain Hill lodge is constructed of stock brick with three bays of blind arcading and brick dressings designed to resemble a channelled ashlar feature. This simple yet handsome building would have marked the border between the formal gardens and the wider estate beyond.

### **The Orangery.**

When building his new house de Grey also made changes to the layout of some of the gardens. Most notably he demolished an early 18th century Batty Langley building known as the Green House, probably a type of orangery, and built in its place a new orangery. He chose an alternative orientation to bring a cohesion to the gardens and the new house, which was in a different position than the old house. The Batty Langley building was to the west of the old house, roughly level with it on a north south axis. It faced south into the garden. The new house is about fifty metres to the north of the position of the old house and so de Grey designed his Orangery facing towards the east, looking inwards and effectively framing the garden.



Fig 45: The Orangery.

It is a striking building. Generally it is considered to be of a French style, often attributed to Blondel's *Maison de Plaisance*, but some consider that it also has more northern European influences. Its garden facing elevation is of painted cement stucco over brick, which paint analysis has shown to have originally been a honeyed colour which has now been restored. Built on the artificial mound from the earlier building the Orangery is single storeyed at the front while the rear of the building is of two storeys, with an arcaded undercroft level. The undercroft originally housed water tanks and boilers for heating the Orangery above. The garden front is of eleven bays with the central and two end bays being more prominent. This echoes the main house with its central and side pavilions. The windows are metal framed as is consistent with this building type, but unlike the main house they were not gilded. There a number of decorative elements, including decorative keystones, urns and

baskets of flowers. The main door opening is supported by a caryatid and an Atlas. The end bays have domed slate roofs and a balustraded parapet runs around the building. Some of the original putti statues are now missing. These were of artificial stone by Felix Austin.<sup>268</sup> Davies comments that it is unusual that de Grey did not make more use of artificial stone either on the ornaments for the main house or for garden statuary as it was becoming very popular at the time. He suggests that de Grey's initial enthusiasm for artificial stone was diminished after his attempts to construct the service range with it had ended in a marked lack of success leading the use of Bath stone and traditional brick throughout.<sup>269</sup> Pevsner did not have anything particularly flattering to say of the Orangery although as with the house he incorrectly attributed it to Clephan.<sup>270</sup> In his description of the Orangery he wrote:

...a very dissolute design, again in this ahead of its date....End bays with square French domes. Strange pilasters with basket capitals and little mats hanging from them.<sup>271</sup>

The building was stocked with orange trees in large pots. These had originally been purchased from King Louis Philippe of France and provided an abundant crop of fruit for the house.<sup>272</sup> During the summer months the trees were removed from the Orangery and placed on the path in front of the building and along the slopes below. The large trees were able to be taken outside via an ingenious disguised door on the

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268 J. Davies, *Garden Ornaments at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire 1700-1917*, *Wrest Park Conservation Plan*, English Heritage, 2009. X967/1/16. 210. BARS.

269 Davies, *Garden Ornaments at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire 1700-1917*.

270 This is corrected in the 2014 edition to attribute the Orangery to de Grey. Pevsner, Nikolaus and O'Brien, Charles, *The Buildings of England. Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press, 2014), 346.

271 Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pevsner Architectural Guides Bedfordshire Huntingdon and Peterborough* (London: Yale University Press, 1968, 2002 reprint), 173.

272 *Wrest Park Conservation Management Plan*, Gazetteer G; Dr. Twigs Way, The Landscape, English Heritage, 2005, X967/1/5/1. 84. BARS.

north side of the building. These are double doors on massive hinges. Of a wooden construction they are rendered and painted to look as one with the rest of the building. There is even a decorative basket of fruit which serves to obscure the upper part of the opening. Internally the Orangery was largely unornamented. The floor would have been of stone slabs, probably with planting beds. It was heated by a boiler at the undercroft level through metal grilles in the floor. Irrigation was provided from a well in the undercroft and access was from a staircase, now blocked, which gave access between the two storeys.

### **Attitudes to Louis XIV architecture in England. Why is Wrest Park House not better regarded?**

An account of a visit to Wrest Park by William Lucas in 1840, published in *A Quaker Journal*, describes a contemporary opinion of the house:

To Silsoe with T Bellamy and wife – Lord de Grey's house does not grow on me with further acquaintance, it is so completely French and nothing grand in the mass outwardly. The old garden in which we walked, lovely with their fresh water, velvet lawns, noble trees and fine avenues.<sup>273</sup>

Although there is a handful of examples of the French style being adopted for English country houses during the 19th century it might be considered that de Grey's choice was not driven by a widespread fashion and nor was it the start of one. Yet, not only is Wrest Park House visually pleasing, it is also successful as a functioning building. As will be discussed in the next chapter, de Grey paid close attention to the details of the basic footprint of the house with the sole intention of rendering it the most conducive to the needs of those living there. It has an extensive service range,

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<sup>273</sup> Simon Houfe, *Through Visitor's Eyes*, (Bedfordshire: The Book Castle, 1990), 85.



an early and competently executed example of service accommodation of a type unusual for the time. It is, by most measures, a successful building. For these reasons it is difficult to understand why the house is so little discussed, either by de Grey's contemporaries or by modern commentators.

One possibility is that it is a style that became associated with the *nouveau-riche* who were infiltrating the ranks of the aristocratic gentry from the latter decades of the 18th century,<sup>274</sup> a style for which derision has continued, unquestioned, until the present day. In Girouard's well regarded examination of Victorian country houses he suggests that there were two main thrusts of appreciation for French style architecture; one in the first decades of the 19th century and a second, which he calls the *nouveau-riche style*, in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>275</sup> Placing Wrest firmly into the former category Girouard is rather complimentary about de Grey and Wrest, saying that the house was:

...all carried out on the grand scale and with considerable panache.<sup>276</sup>

Girouard makes a clear association of the second category with new money and upward social mobility. This perspective singles Wrest House out as an exception to the rule that in matters of architecture replicating French châteaux was squarely the preserve of the *nouveau-riche*. Although this represents the opinion of one late 20th century commentator might it be considered that deviating into French style

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274 "At the close of the eighteenth century nobles were above all great landowners, but by no means all great landowners were noblemen". F.M.L Thompson *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*. (London: Routledge, 1963), 14.

275 Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 292.

276 Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. 425.

architecture has been considered to be of a rather arriviste taste by association, regardless of the pedigree of the owner, since Wrest House was built?

The house and gardens at Wrest Park were under institutional ownership from the 1940s and this might be considered one reason why the house has been sidelined in the annals of English architectural history. It was not easily accessible to visitors, and until recent efforts by the current owners English Heritage, those who did see it were greeted with an increasingly shabby house. If not quite neglected, its glories were certainly rather subdued. Writing in 2003, Simon Jenkins found the institutional use of the building to be severely detrimental to the originally spectacular interiors:

The best of the reception rooms, the library, is packed with modern bookcases and computer equipment. Other rooms are cheaply kitted out for lectures and seminars. It is like a Soviet academy of sciences camped in a St Petersburg palace.<sup>277</sup>

This 20th century obscurity goes some way to explaining the contemporary disregard for Wrest Park House, but the appreciation of country houses has existed for as long as the buildings themselves and Wrest has never been a name on the lips of country house admirers and has not often been heralded in written commentary.<sup>278</sup> De Grey's choice of 18th century French style does not appear to have found favour with any generation since it was constructed.

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<sup>277</sup> Simon Jenkins, *England's Thousand Best Country Houses* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), 6.

<sup>278</sup> For example, in the Victoria County History for Bedfordshire, completed in 1908, the house is described in very dry terms, with no detail about the style in which it was built, "The present house is of two stories and an attic, with projecting bays at the centre and angles of the south front..." etc. The description of the gardens is much more effusive. Naturally, the house was included in this publication, but it was clearly felt to warrant no special discussion about the way it looked. William Page (ed) 'Parishes: Flitton cum Silsoe', in *A History of the County of Bedford: Volume 2*, (London, 1908), 325-333.

Changes in garden fashions might also have played a part. Wilson and Mackley point out that:

It was only the gradual shift to the more informal styles of the picturesque landscape that once celebrated houses and gardens such as Boughton, Kimbolton and Wrest were dismissed by the Georgian tourist trade as being sited in low, miserable situations.<sup>279</sup>

De Grey was, perhaps, aware that the garden so loved by him and the family was hopelessly old fashioned. He couldn't move the estate, so completely changing the house was one avenue open to him in altering the perception of the 'family seat'. This indicates that he had a refined sense of history and decorum.

It was much more common that admiration for French styles was articulated in interior design and in the acquisition of furniture from the height of the Rococo period. French style interiors can be seen in England as an acceptable style during the Georgian and throughout the Victorian period, and it was often used as a shorthand for opulence and sophistication and as an ever suitable backdrop for the display of expensive art and furniture. Although it can be demonstrated that French style external architecture was a relative rarity in 19th century country house design, even the small sample area of Bedfordshire and the surrounding counties shows that it did exist, albeit rarely. For the period in which de Grey was conceiving and building Wrest House it is accurate to say that there was very little else being created in an 18th century French style. Contrary to this view, Girouard considered that:

De Grey had a taste for the dix-huitième not uncommon in his generation,<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Robert Wilson and Andrew Mackley, *The Building of the English Country House*. (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2000), 282.

<sup>280</sup> Mark Girouard. *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 425.

but it is arguable that this taste was not common, certainly in matters of external architecture.

## **Chapter conclusion.**

De Grey was a confident architect, who designed his own house, using the architectural style of Louis XIV as his inspiration. There is no reason to doubt de Grey's assertion that he was "his own architect". As an architect he showed himself to be flexible and able to adopt different styles for different projects. His choice at Wrest Park was carefully considered, not an expression of Francophilia.

He used a French style at Wrest simply because he felt that it was appropriate and that it fit in with the existing garden, which he considered to be of a French Louis XIV style.

What were the prevailing styles of country houses in England at that time? Classical and gothic buildings dominated, with a turn towards the vibrancy of eclecticism during the first decades of the 19th century. Wrest does not fall into any of these categories because its unusual style is not a sign of eclecticism. It was a choice made so that the new building would be an appropriate addition to the gardens, rather than as a reflection of an 'anything goes' attitude towards architectural style.

Design books were being published in England at the time, but de Grey did not take ideas for Wrest Park from them. None that I have found from the period show any examples of buildings in a Louis XIV style. Not one. Many other styles were represented, but not anything French. De Grey very probably would have seen many

of these design books, both through personal interest in the subject and as part of his position of President of the Institute of British Architects. He also almost certainly knew some of the authors of the books personally, but does not appear to have been influenced by them.

There are no other examples of French style country houses from before de Grey's time or during the period when he was conceiving of and building his house. It was an unprecedented and unique style for him to choose for an English country house.

How did 17th and 18th century French architects affect de Grey? He wrote that it was seeing buildings in Paris that gave him the idea for the gate lodges and subsequently the style for the main house. This decision was made by de Grey some years before he inherited the estate. He thought about it over a long period and so it was clearly a carefully considered decision. De Grey purchased his French design books after he built the lodges. This was a deliberate choice to be true to the style, or at least to have a good source for guidance.

De Grey named Blondel, Le Pautre and Mansart because they were influential and well regarded. They are a representative selection of names associated with 17th and 18th century French architecture. Perhaps they were simply the authors of, or named in, books that de Grey owned. It was quite possibly a combination of all of these factors.

The house looks authentically French but it is neither a copy of a single building nor a collection of elements of a group of buildings (as Waddesdon might be considered,

for example). It is the proportion and details that de Grey used in his design that make his house so emphatically and successfully French and the details that make it original within the style.

## Chapter Three. The House at Wrest park. Construction, design and technology

### Introduction.

In the previous chapter I examined why de Grey chose to design his house at Wrest Park in an 18th century French architectural style. In this chapter I will examine those features of de Grey's house that were not dictated by style. I will argue that it is not only the choice of style that makes the house noteworthy. Other elements such as space planning, the approach to the design of service areas and the use of technology were innovative and original. As Girouard noted, this was no simple matter:

To marshal the immensely complicated accommodation of a Victorian country house in such a way that all the elements were conveniently placed and adequately lighted, that the important rooms had the right prospect and aspect, that no one saw what he shouldn't see or meet those whom he shouldn't meet, was a formidable task for an architect.<sup>281</sup>

It is useful to consider further the reasons why de Grey built a new house. Why did he not simply remodel the existing house that he had inherited along with the estate? What were his requirements for the house? Who did he intend to entertain in his house, and for what other functions was it required? De Grey showed skill as an architect in his aesthetic design for the house. It is also interesting to examine how the house demonstrates his skill as an architect in the more mundane but essential elements of space planning, grouping of rooms and the flow around the house to suit

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<sup>281</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 31.

the family, their guests and the needs of a smoothly operating staff of servants. It is this area in which de Grey showed himself to be a skilled and forward thinking architect. A modern heating system and a comprehensive water supply system would seem to suggest that de Grey embraced the use of new technologies in his house but this is an area worth examining.

### **The need for a new house in Bedfordshire.**

As already seen, de Grey wrote that it had been apparent for some time that a new house was probably the only solution to the crumbling mansion that already existed at Wrest. The 1st Duke of Kent had plans drawn up for a new house by Giacomo Leoni during the 1720s but shifting finances kept the project firmly on the drawing board.<sup>282</sup> De Grey will have had access to these designs, and although he did not employ the classical style of the Leoni design he did position his new house in a similar location as that proposed by the Duke of Kent. It seems likely that de Grey's claims that the old house was too far gone to be of any use was accurate. Wilson and Mackley commented on how country houses could become reduced to a parlous condition:

The manor houses of the gentry observed (a) cycle of order and neglect as family circumstances ebbed and flowed. Some houses of course became so decrepit, so incommensurate, so old-fashioned that a new one seemed the only solution. At Wrest, Earl de Grey built a new French styled house in 1834-39.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> James Collett-White, (ed) *Inventories of Bedfordshire Country Houses 1714-1830*. (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1995) 246.

<sup>283</sup> Wilson, R and Mackley, A. *The Building of the English Country House*. Hambledon Continuum, London 2000. p. 271.



The 1830s was a decade during which country house building was at a momentary lull. For the most part the landed aristocracy were consolidating their wealth, and making improvements rather than creating new residences. Building was expensive and for de Grey to do so was, consciously or otherwise, a demonstration of his wealth, especially as good results could be obtained much more economically with sensitive remodelling.<sup>284</sup>

When Earl de Grey inherited the estate and title in 1833 he had been making preparations of various types for some years, from the funding and design of the new parish church at Silsoe, to advising his aunt on matters of estate management and the bestowing of the 'livings' associated with her estate, to designing the Silsoe Lodges as a way of experimenting with the style of architecture he would employ once he was in a position to rebuild. His initial thought had been to build a new house in the same position as the old one. He planned to demolish the oldest section of the house first and re-build on the same spot, then once it was complete to move in and demolish the remainder of the house.<sup>285</sup> He went as far as having some plans drawn up to this end by John Shaw (1766-1832) in 1818. Although de Grey eventually decided to build in a different position, and to design the building himself, it is useful to examine Shaw's plan and elevation drawing.<sup>286</sup> The plan has some superficial similarities to the house that de Grey went on to build. The arrangement

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284 "Houses could be given a periodic facelift or extension, and their interior spaces re-arranged. In comparison with the costs of new houses, this could often be achieved quite cheaply". Robert Wilson and Andrew Mackley, *The Building of the English Country House*. (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2000), 273.

285 "My original notion was to build upon the same spot — arranging the general plan in the beginning, so as to form a whole when completed; but so arranged as to be capable of being done piecemeal. I meant to have pulled down Queen Anne's wing first; to have rebuilt on the ground; and then pulled down the drawing room and so on. I have a plan furnished by Mr Shaw' the architect upon that principle." A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." BHRS vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

286 Plan and elevation drawings by Shaw, dated 1818. L33/146-147. BARS.

of entrance hall, staircase hall and billiard room as a three room axis between side wings that are two rooms deep bisected by a service corridor is akin to what now stands at Wrest, but really this is where the similarities end. De Grey's house had a much more sophisticated arrangement of service stairs, light wells and, as a key difference, in his house all of the bedrooms were on the upper floors.

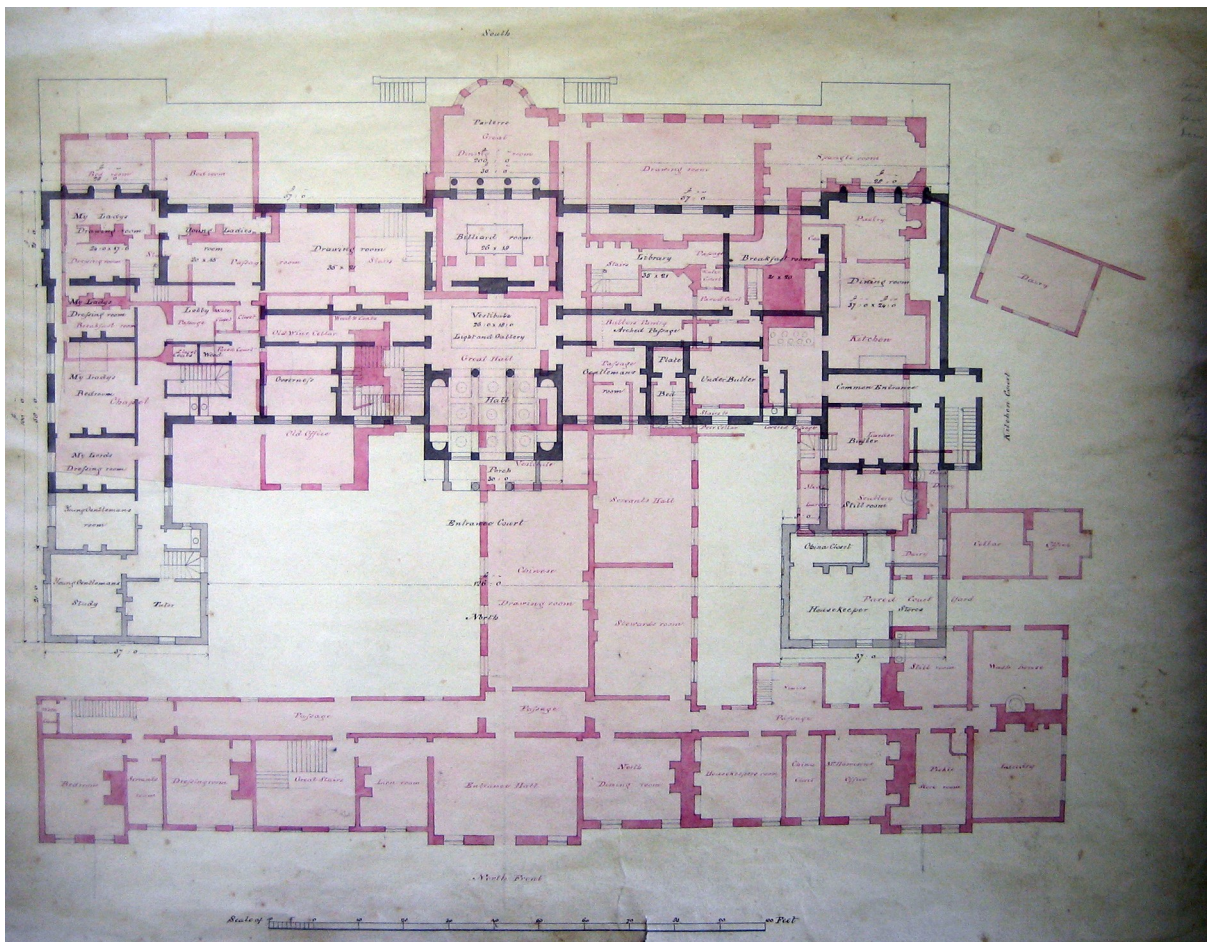


Fig 46: Shaw's plan. 1818. L33/146-147. BARS

The elevation drawing shows a neat but unimposing building. It would have been quite like de Grey's house in size and in rhythm, with a central pavilion and end pavilions.

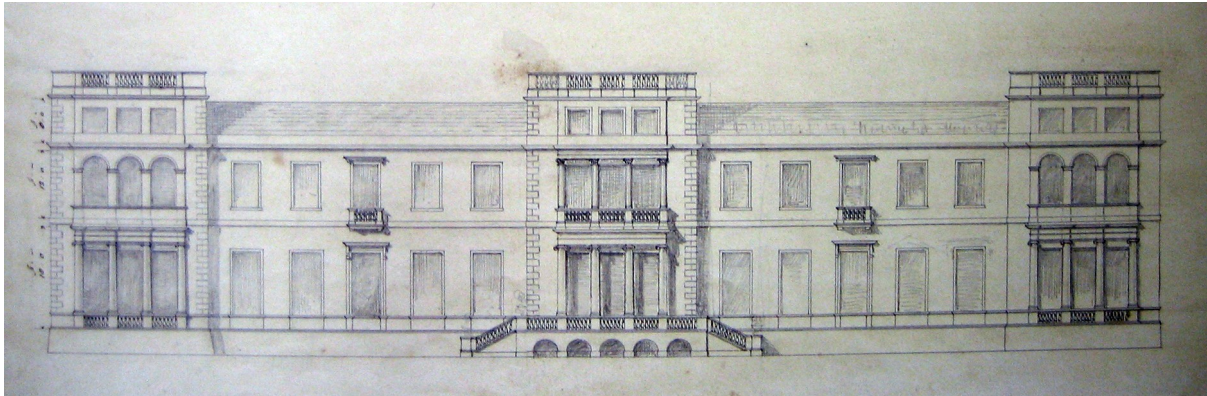


Fig 47: Shaw's elevation drawing. 1818. L33/146-147. BARS

Otherwise it is of an unexciting classical style with Italianate touches to the windows. It is wholly unremarkable and de Grey's taste and ideas obviously changed greatly over the following few years. Once he inherited Wrest he was ready to begin work on a new house:

My aunt's death took place in May, 1833; and having made as many preparations as we could during the summer and autumn, the new building was commenced on the 12th February, 1834, on which day the foundation stone under the south west corner of the conservatory was laid.<sup>287</sup>

Having considered the question of why de Grey chose to employ a French style of architecture, it is also of interest to examine why he felt it appropriate to build on such a grand scale. In his memoir of 1859 de Grey wrote that:

A new house appeared to be indispensable, if the place was to be retained as a family residence; which, with so large a county property and consequent influence, was a matter of necessity.<sup>288</sup>

It was probably seen as essential that the Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire had a house of suitable scale and grandeur befitting the position and, for some years

<sup>287</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85

<sup>288</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 45. BARS.

before inheriting Wrest Park, de Grey had been making plans of exactly how he could improve the family seat:

It was quite clear to us all, many years before the place came to me, that something upon rather a great scale must be done, if at all. The old house with its cracked walls and its long passages, and its windows that annually became less capable of being closely shut down, was evidently incapable of any essential repair or improvement.<sup>289</sup>

De Grey knew that on inheriting Wrest Park he would come into possession of more than just the estate, and that the title it came with would confer upon him a further elevation to his social standing. For a man of de Grey's position, his house would function as more than just the family home. It would also have a public function, in particular it would need to serve de Grey in his role of a County Lord Lieutenant.

Wrest Park was a residence, but also a form of 'town hall' in that it needed to be suitable for both large county functions and for the day to day meetings and appointments of a Lord Lieutenant and for the management of the estate. This public and private function of the house was perhaps not only intended for de Grey himself, but with an eye to the generations of the family to come. Sadly, the house was destined to be a family home in the truest sense for de Grey only. His heirs did not make the house their primary residence and over subsequent generations the house fell further from favour until it was finally lost to the family after the First World War.

## **1. Planning the House.**

To understand how de Grey wanted the house to work both as a successful home and an administrative centre for the estate, it is useful to consider the plan of the

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<sup>289</sup> "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 45. BARS.

house and the flow through and around it. A benefit of creating an entirely new house was that de Grey would be able to ensure that his house performed well both as a work of architectural design and as a triumph of space planning. In looking at plans of country houses over the Victorian period it becomes clear that many elements of country house planning that were to become standard such as billiard rooms, WCs with cloakroom suites, a gentleman's room with private access and private family suites began to feature from the later 1840s. Wrest Park is an early example of the complex, well planned Victorian country house.

In references to Wrest Park, it is always the French style that causes comment, but de Grey also achieved what I consider to be noteworthy success in his functional design of the house. Although in his description of building the house de Grey does not linger over the functional details, examination of the building shows that he must have given it considerable thought.

De Grey made changes to the estate before he inherited it. Some were administrative changes and his aunt, the Countess de Grey, handed over the reins of running the estate gradually. The enclosure of parts of the family land was carried out on the authority of the Countess, but under the advice and watchful eye of her nephew. We have already noted the new gate lodges, and he also made changes to the gardens, including the laying out of new paths and relocating the Brown column. As we have seen, De Grey had been giving serious consideration to building a new house since 1818. He described in his letter to his daughter that after he had discarded the idea of building on the site of the old house as shown in Shaw's design

he began sketching out his own plans for a house in a new location to the north of the old house. This was during the 1820s, and in an initial phase he passed his ideas on to a clerk to work up into full drawings:

I made my drawings, which I put into the hands of a Mr Brown, who had been Nash's clerk, to make the working drawings. He was a conceited fellow, though a clever one; and a few years after, when everything was in progress, he asked Mary one day something about the success of the plans which he had drawn. Luckily by that time everything had been completely changed; the east front had been transferred to the west etc.; and she was able to say with perfect truth and with the satisfaction for which you will give her credit that his plans had been altogether abandoned.<sup>290</sup>

It seems that the scheme went through a few alterations before the final design was settled. The plan that de Grey decided upon was both innovative and highly practical.

One need only read the account of the creation of the house at Wrest that de Grey wrote for his daughter to understand that he gave great consideration not only to the impact that the house would have on his contemporaries, but that it should be designed to function well in all aspects.

### **The essential elements of space planning.**

The two main aspects to be considered in planning the house were the comfort of the family and the creation of facilities of the standard required so that the servants could meet the comfort of the family. Having discussed in the previous chapter the likelihood that de Grey consulted Blondel's *De la Distribution des Maisons de Plaisance, et de la Decoration des Edifices en General*, it is interesting to note that

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<sup>290</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

Blondel included many thoughts, indeed edicts, concerning the planning of residences, with particular emphasis on the circulation of servants. He was apparently the first architect to articulate this element of house building.<sup>291</sup> Blondel believed that in designing a residence the architect needed to consider it as a whole, rather than merely a series of rooms connected together and that a building should be put together to reflect good spacial planning, the correct use of materials and overall proportion. All parts of the construction should be considered for their contribution to the overall harmony of the place.

Blondel was writing with an aristocratic and wealthy clientele in mind and suggested designs and innovations befitting their rank. He was also writing at a time when the notion of privacy between the family and their servants was becoming more generally expected. This ideal was to find full fruition in the vast, segmented and segregated, service ranges of the Victorian and Edwardian country house. At the time that de Grey was building, whilst a certain remove from the servants was expected, planning did not always take it fully into account, nor was there always a good comprehension of or consideration that pleasant working environments for the servants was conducive to an overall frictionless running of the house.

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<sup>291</sup> Reed Benhamou, "Parallel Walls, Parallel Worlds: The Places of Masters and Servants in the "*Maisons de plaisance*" of Jacques-Francois Blondel," *Journal of Design History*, Vol 7, no. 1, (1994): 1-11.



## The form and layout of Wrest Park.

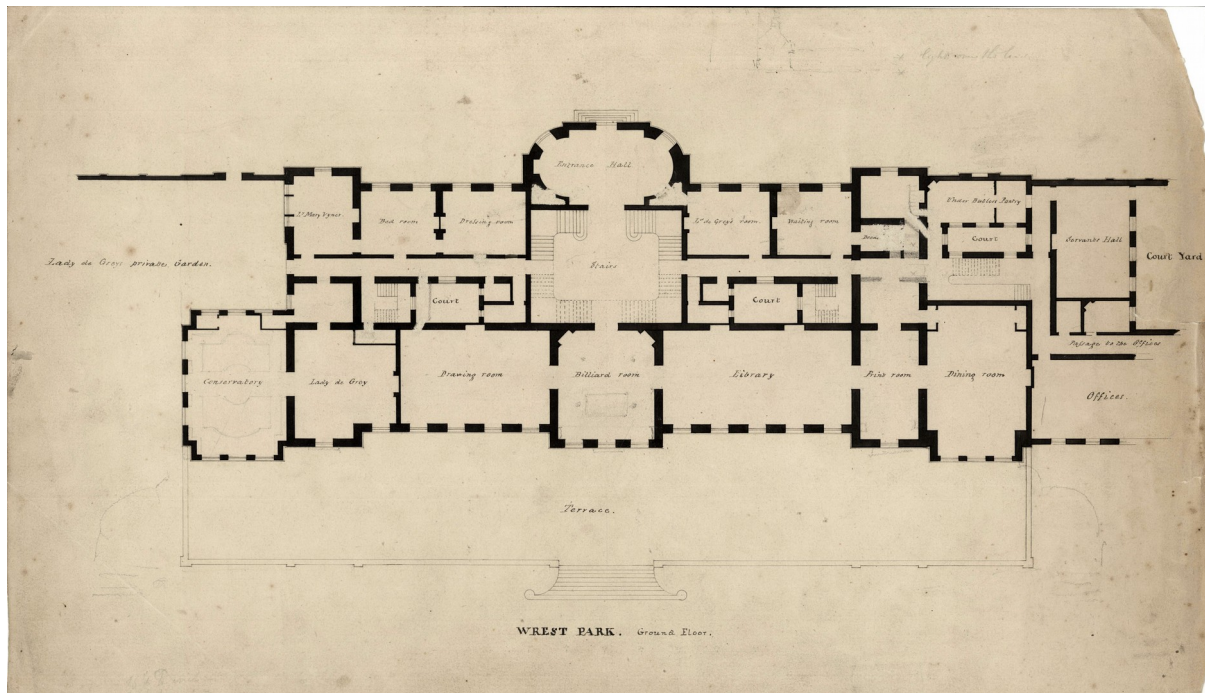


Fig 48: De Grey's ground floor plan, not quite as built. For example the billiard room became the ante-library. © RIBA.

It is clear that de Grey must have given a great deal of thought to the flow and plan of his house. Layout planning was not a new thing, nor was it unique to de Grey, but it was an area to which he had evidently given some consideration. He had probably experienced the inconvenience of a poor country house layout (perhaps in houses like the old house at Wrest where gradual accretion took the place of carefully considered design). In his memoir he remarked on the lack of a coherent plan as one of the reasons for demolishing the old house rather than remodelling it.<sup>292</sup>

There are various elements of the layout and flow of the house and associated buildings which make Wrest Park house unusual and special. The main house is

<sup>292</sup> ...and with no suite of apartments on any floor". "Memoirs of Earl de Grey." 1859. CRT/190/45/2. 45. BARS.



essentially of a double pile<sup>293</sup> formation, with a corridor running lengthways through the house as a division between each row of rooms. This anticipates the attitude towards a division of space between the private or family areas, and the service areas that would be seen in later Victorian country houses. Double pile houses, with a double row of rooms, usually with one row facing the principal front of the house and the other facing the garden front, were popular for classical styles, working well for the symmetrical façades of Palladian mansions, so in this respect Wrest was not innovative but by the 1830s the double pile had gone out of vogue. There are other examples of double pile houses from the 1830s such as Blore's design for Pull House, but for the main part country house plans were becoming more complex. This happened as the domestic life of the Victorian country house owner became more complicated, certainly in terms of the vast array of rooms required for specialised functions. This was not confined to the service areas as country houses began to contain smoking rooms, billiard rooms and other rooms that were not required in earlier houses. By comparison to later Victorian houses Wrest Park has a rather straightforward plan. It might even be called dull but in fact it probably made the house much easier and more pleasant to live in. Rooms are adjacent to those of associated function and there are none of the torturous corridors lurking between long distant rooms that appear in so many Victorian country houses.

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293 "DOUBLE PILE, A row of rooms two deep." *Pevsner's Architectural Glossary*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 56.

## 2. The Layout of the House.

### Entrance Hall and Staircase Hall.

The principal entrance to the house was, of course, through the front door. De Grey did not provide the visitor on the step any protection from the weather in the form of a *porte-cochère*. This was a bold omission given England's unpredictable climate. He also raised the level of the ground floor slightly, in order to allow for a semi-subterranean basement level, so that the entrance was reached via a flight of steps. This has the added benefit of making the entrance more imposing, especially as it was flanked by large lanterns and a pair of statues. I would suggest that the arrangement of porch-less entrance stairs further emphasises the overall feel of an urban residence rather than that of a rural seat. The house has something of the feel of a Parisian residence rather than a country château. London houses also often have stairs up to the front door, in this case due to the lack of space necessitating a half basement service area.

It is unusual in an English country house for the front door to open not into a vestibule or a screens passage of a great hall, that vestigial remainder of the English hall house tradition, but rather into a modest but well-appointed entrance hall. From here the visitor would proceed through to the staircase hall, which would also have functioned as space for large gatherings such as Christmas entertainments for tenants. This arrangement of entrance hall rather than a great hall is a departure that makes the first impression of the house closer to a London club than a country seat. So, from the first step into the house the visitor would have been aware that it was of

an unusual layout. The entrance hall also provided direct access to both the offices to the east or into the gentlemen's domain of the billiard room and cloakroom to the west, without having to enter the staircase hall. This meant that visitors did not have to traverse the main family area or state rooms in order to gain access to other lower status parts of the house. This allowed the passage of de Grey's business visitors either through the front door, but not the main house, or through the luggage or servants entrances and then up the eastern back stairs as befitted their status.



Fig 49: Staircase hall, one of a series of watercolours of the interiors at Wrest Park by T. Scandrett. 1850, L33/222 BARS.

De Grey intended that the staircase hall (see figure 49), would be a central statement of grandeur. It shares some characteristics with a central hall, or cortile,

although an English variation would by necessity have a roof rather than being a central courtyard open to the sky. Kerr described this arrangement:

On its native ground the Cortile was the interior courtyard of a Palazzo, primarily given to the sky but ultimately covered over in various characteristic instances: It necessarily embraced the entire height of the building; accommodated within itself, or had an immediate adjunct, a stately staircase.<sup>294</sup>

This provides a good description of de Grey's staircase hall. It was the central circulation space within the main part of the house and was also used for large functions such as tenants Christmas parties, and as part of the suite of rooms with the library and drawing room used for County entertainments. In his highly influential book of 1865 the architect Robert Kerr (1823-1904) described large central halls as, “a Thoroughfare and no more”,<sup>295</sup> and thought that the proportions of such a space, particularly when of double height, made them unconducive for entertaining.

“When... the Central Hall is used as a Reception-room for important occasions, the impression left upon the mind of an Englishman is that of being received in a fine Vestibule at best”.<sup>296</sup>

I draw attention to this because I have often reflected that the staircase hall must have been a difficult place in which to hold receptions. Although it gave good access to the cloakroom and lavatories beside the light wells it was essentially a circulation space, leaving little room for discreet access for the servants, who would have had to cross the guests with their coats, and with any refreshments, being so far from the

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<sup>294</sup> Kerr, Robert. *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, From The Parsonage to the Palace: With Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans*. (London: John Murray, 1865), 171.

<sup>295</sup> Kerr, *The Gentleman's House*, 172.

<sup>296</sup> Kerr, *The Gentleman's House*, 172.

well designed back routes that they would have been able to use when serving in the other family rooms. It is of the full height of the building, with further elevation being provided by the glazed lantern roof. Although height can convey a sense of occasion I would argue that the dimensions of this room might not have provided a truly commodious setting for a party.

In a true cortile both ground and first floor level would have an arcade from which the rooms would open directly. When considering the staircase hall de Grey, as he often did when designing a room, decided upon one defining element, which then informed the completed area. In this case it was the double branched staircase. Initially he had drawn a design which included an arcaded first floor, with doors to the upper floor rooms along it, but decided that this would not afford a suitable division between public and private areas:

I hardly know how and when the conception of this place entered my head. I have a pencil sketch at a very early stage, where the double-branching stair formed the principal feature, but at that time the intention was to have had a gallery with columns all round the upper floor, opening to the different rooms. But I accidentally saw a house in Yorkshire (Mr Preston of Morely), where tho' the taste and style was totally different, the inconvenience of such a plan was apparent. Every housemaid in clearing out the rooms hears every thing said below; and every gentleman who lounges below sees every house maid, both very objectionable.<sup>297</sup>

Clearly de Grey gave careful thought to the layout of his house, not allowing preferences of the architectural design elements to take precedence over functional details. It can be considered that this demonstrates de Grey's skill as an architect. A less assiduous student of architecture might not have understood how to arrange the

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<sup>297</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.



main, central space in such an orderly manner. Writing twenty five years later Kerr reached much the same conclusion regarding arcaded cortiles:

...there is this objection to the Cortile, that the chief Bedrooms, which necessarily occupy the upper story, appear to want privacy. If their doors open upon the surrounding Arcade-corridors, their exposure to each other is especially inconvenient; in fact the floor of the Cortile, do what we may, can never be divested of its public character; it is little if any more private than the Entrance Hall.<sup>298</sup>

Clearly it is a straightforward matter of observation of other buildings that informs such an understanding of the use and flow of rooms, but it does make the point that de Grey was capable of showing skill and nuance in his designs.

### **The Principal, or State Rooms.**

The principal suite of state rooms at Wrest Park comprises of the drawing room, the ante-library, the library, the print room and the dining room. These rooms run along almost the full length of the south facing garden front, with views across the terrace and along the main north-south axial view across the Long Water to the Archer Pavilion at the southern reach of the formal garden, half a mile away. These rooms are connected *enfilade* east to west, with the range being entered from the main staircase hall (see figure 50). The service corridors which run along the rear of the rooms allowed servants discreet access without having to cross the paths of the family.

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<sup>298</sup> Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, From The Parsonage to the Palace: With Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans*. (London: John Murray, 1865), 173.



Fig 50: View along the enfilade, from the dining room to the drawing room.



Having examined a large selection of 19th century country house plans I believe it is apparent that de Grey's layout of a single, large suite of state rooms, connected with an *enfilade* of grand doorways was highly unusual for the period. It was surely a decision made on the basis of the French approach in which de Grey built the house, but the resulting plan is unique for the period in England, having been more commonplace in the preceding century. It was more usual throughout this period for houses to have a less regular layout, and for rooms to be interconnected in some cases, but more often not, and never with a parade of doorways giving a straight and unimpeded view between a number of rooms.

The state room suite is entered through the ante-library. It connects the staircase hall with the primary axial view of the garden. It was originally designed to be used as a billiard room, but the plan was abandoned on practical grounds.<sup>299</sup> In any case it was soon apparent that the library could not hold sufficient bookcases to house de Grey's large collection and so it was decided instead that this room should serve as an addition to the library.

The drawing room is at the west end of the suite of formal rooms that run along the length of the garden front of the house. When de Grey began designing the house he had no intention of including a drawing room, considering them to be outmoded and that his family would use the library as a sitting room instead. It was his concern that critics might assume that the lack of a drawing room was an error that led de Grey to include it. In fact the family did not use the room very much, reserving it for

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299 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

balls and other formal events that de Grey was obliged to host as County Lord Lieutenant. In describing the drawing room to his daughter de Grey wrote:

When I was planning the house I had a great mind to have no such room. It is of no real use in these days, when a library is no longer locked up to the world, and when it is made, as we always do here, the permanent and perpetual living room, especially when it has contiguous rooms at each side, where silent chess-players or noisy polkas may go if they wish. But custom required it, and being an amateur architect people would have imagined that I had omitted it.<sup>300</sup>

If the staircase hall was the central circulation space within the house then the library was the domestic heart. It was the room in which the family spent most of their time together and the dimensions of the space formed the foundation for the proportions and scale of the rest of the building. When planning his new house at Wrest, de Grey had given consideration to the library at an early stage. He wanted a 50ft room, with a pair of fine French fireplaces. Again, as with the staircase hall it was an initial aspiration, the size and double fireplaces, that informed the rest of the room, and in this case, the proportions of the whole plan.

The next room in the *enfilade* is the print room. Originally intended to be a corridor room between the library and dining room it soon became used for books and prints as the family's collection expanded.

There are a number of sources for the dining room. The unusual dimensions of the room which narrows at each end, were taken from the dining room at Newby Hall in Yorkshire which de Grey had earlier remodelled:

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300 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

In the dining room which I built a great many years ago at Newby, I was forced by the architectural construction to make one end narrower than the full width of the rest of the room. Various suggestions were offered: columns, small vestibule, alcove and such things as are usually adopted. But I did not like them; and the scheme of making the centre of the room a square of the fullest width with a recess at each end of the diminished width was adopted. Necessity was the ground of it; but the success in one respect was unexpected and striking, viz, that it made it convenient and agreeable either for a large or small party. For the former you had the actual full size of the room; whereas in the latter case the eye was guided by the size of the centre ceiling and conveyed the idea of only a room of moderate size. The effect of this was so good that I resolved to repeat it here.<sup>301</sup>

De Grey felt that his dining room conversion at Newby Hall had been a success and used his innovation to good effect at Wrest Park. Although part of a suite of rooms its proportions give an indication of the skill with which de Grey approached each of the rooms within the house. They flow well together whilst retaining a sense of each room being individual and well suited to its purpose.

### **The Dining Room and Conservatory as part of the Garden Front.**

One of the successes of de Grey's design is that of the dining room and conservatory. Invisible from the north front of the house this pair of single storey rooms balance one another, forming end pavilions to the east and west of the Garden Front, creating symmetry. The dining room forms the terminal of the state room *enfilade*, while the conservatory is connected to the main building, but inside feels like a separate entity. It feels, as conservatories are supposed to, like a transitional space between house and garden. It is constructed of stone and glass, but unlike many conservatories of the period it is designed to blend in with the house. Girouard wrote that, "(Nowhere) did efforts to harmonize these delicate glass

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301 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

monsters with the far from delicate houses to which they were attached meet with notable success.”<sup>302</sup> This is clearly not the case at Wrest Park where de Grey's well considered design means that the conservatory blends in with the rest of the house. Paired with the dining room at the opposite end of the Garden Front it creates balance (see figure 51). When viewed from the garden it is not obviously a conservatory but appears as a cohesive part of the house, while performing its function perfectly. The stone construction does not detract from the feeling of light and air within the room. This use of a pair of rooms with such very different functions to achieve external symmetry is one of the details that is unique to Wrest Park. Conservatories were highly fashionable and were correspondingly numerous, but they were always designed to be seen externally as conservatories rather than as part of a harmonious façade.

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<sup>302</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 43.



Fig 51: South facing garden front.

The glass panes in the conservatory windows are smaller than those of the large casement windows of the main house. This is so that the windows could provide more tailored ventilation to the plants within the conservatory. In order that this detail did not mar the overall symmetry of the garden front the glazing bars were painted a dark grey so that from a distance they recede, giving the impression of the same sized panes throughout. It is details like this that make Wrest Park noteworthy. The doors were positioned so that there is a straight view from the Countess's Sitting Room, directly down through the Italian Garden and into the walled garden. In his account of the house Earl de Grey wrote that the conservatory:

opens out of her sitting room, and all the doors and gates from her fireplace to the furthest extremity of the kitchen-garden are so disposed that she can see the

whole length and inspect every dung barrow that is wheeled in at Snow's house.<sup>303</sup>

The sitting room is not connected to the *enfilade* of the principal rooms. It is entered separately, forming part of a discrete suite of private family rooms.

### **The location of the Conservatory within the house plan.**

Although it was common for conservatories to open directly into one of the principal rooms of the house<sup>304</sup> this was quite impractical.<sup>305</sup> The Countess de Grey may have experienced the problem of warm damp air having a negative impact in her sitting room as a large glass sliding door was installed between the two rooms. The date of the sliding door is not known, but it seems likely that a solution to the problem of damp ingress would swiftly have been sought. This then is perhaps one of de Grey's less successful elements and could be considered evidence of his relative lack of experience as an architect, although he was following the fashion for conservatories being connected to a primary room. The sliding door is of itself an innovation. It is on sliding runners and has a rococo frame that fits perfectly with the style of the sitting room.

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303 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

304 "Victorian conservatories usually connected up with one of the living rooms." Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 38.

305 "It must never be lost sight of that for a Conservatory to be too directly attached to a dwelling room is inadvisable. The warm moist air, impregnated with vegetable matter and deteriorated by the organic action of the plants, is both unfit to breathe and destructive of the fabrics of furniture and decoration". Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, From The Parsonage to the Palace: With Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans*, (London: John Murray, 1865), p. 127.

## **The western section of the house consisting of a suite of interconnected 'family rooms', a 'house within a house'.**

In the eighteenth century the gentry were constantly on display in their country houses and apparently did not care if their servants and inferiors saw them in the round; by the nineteenth century family life had to be kept apart and protected.<sup>306</sup>

In this section I will discuss one of the most interesting aspects of the space planning at Wrest Park which makes the house unusual and worthy of attention; the fact that the western end of the house is reserved for private family rooms which form a suite of chambers that are discrete from the rest of the house and can be said to form a 'house within a house'. This part of the house is given over to more private family rooms, connected with pleasing logic both horizontally and vertically through the different storeys.

The Countess's Sitting Room is at the west end of the house, and is one of only a few rooms of dual aspect, with windows opening towards the main garden and a view through the conservatory to the Italian Garden outside the west elevation. This chamber, with its ante-room, is a continuation of the main suite of state rooms, but there is no direct access between it and the drawing room next door. It remains private and can be entered from the bedrooms without having to come down the main staircase, giving an element of both privacy and informality. Across the corridor is another sitting room, probably for the use of the adult daughters of the family, and between the two sets of rooms is a door leading out into the Italian Garden.

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<sup>306</sup> Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan. 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 42.

The pair of secondary staircases at either end of the house are almost identical. The main difference is that the handrail of the eastern stairs is of painted metal while that of the western stairs is of a finely finished wood. Tradition in the house says that these represented male and female stairs for the use of the servants. This might be true up to a point, but I would argue that the location would suggest that the western stair was, in fact, for the use of the family when they wished to travel between the bedrooms and dressing rooms of the first floor and the private sitting rooms below. The first floor rooms directly above the Countess's Sitting Room and the second sitting room are of a slightly better quality than other bedrooms. The large suite on the south-west side of the first floor must have been that of the Earl and Countess de Grey, and this is supported by de Grey's plans.<sup>307</sup> Three large bedrooms on the second floor have better quality fireplaces than the other bedrooms on this floor. They are directly above the rooms most likely used by de Grey and his wife. It has long been assumed that they were used as bedrooms for the upper servants, but I would argue that they were probably the nurseries. De Grey's remaining children later had small children of their own and it seems likely that de Grey would have incorporated a suite of nurseries and associated rooms for his grandchildren.

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<sup>307</sup> The undated plans in the RIBA library RIBA PIX REF NO RIBA12156 are not 'as built' plans so need to be considered with caution but the remaining fixtures in the bedrooms in question would support their use by de Grey and his wife.



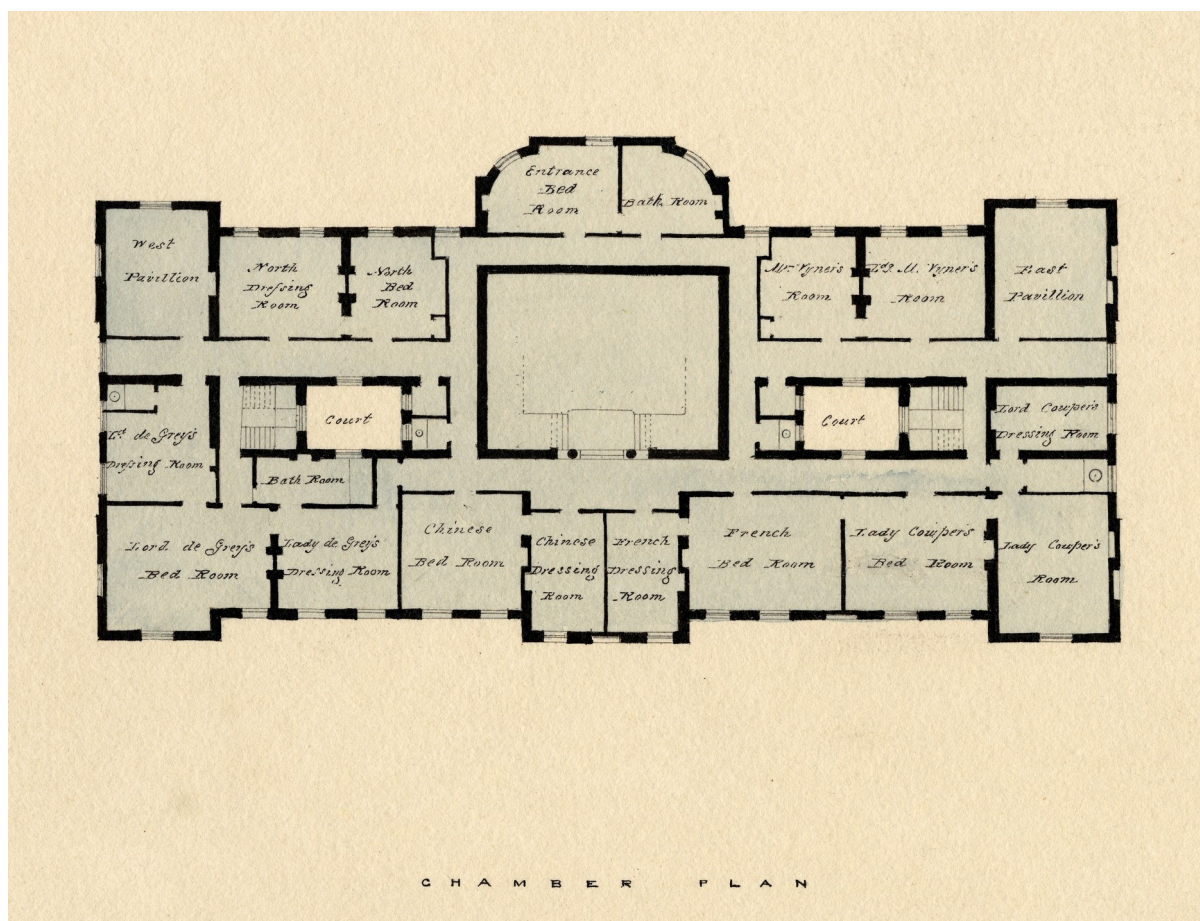


Fig 52: Undated plan of first floor, by Earl de Grey © RIBA.

During the 1870s and 80s de Grey's great granddaughter Ethel Vane (later Lady Ettie Desborough) spent a great deal of her childhood at Wrest Park and recalled that, "Our nurseries were at the top of the house, and our nursery-maid staggered up the vast stone stairs four times a day, carrying heavy trays of meals; once a knife dropped down from the tray, and half cut off the odd-man's nose far below."<sup>308</sup> The higher status secondary staircase could then have been used by the family moving between bedrooms, nursery and private sitting rooms and would also have been

<sup>308</sup> Ettie Desborough, *Eyes of Youth*. Unpublished memoir in private collection. 22.

used by higher status female servants, the ladies maids, the nanny and the governess.

The western part of the house is an example of very well-executed and thoughtful space planning. The family quarters were part of the main house, but could also be seen as a complete and separate 'block'. They were, through the layout, self-contained and to one side of the state rooms. As a suite they are connected vertically and are at the far side of the house from the service range. They are conveniently located on both ground and first floors for discreet access to the WCs. The servants could reach this end of the house via the basement level corridors that run the length of the house from the service range. This must have afforded the family a degree of privacy from guests and servants, whilst still enjoying the convenience and pleasures of residing in a large house. As Kerr later observed:

Although the mistress of a hospitable English house will desire to give her guests every preference, yet this need not deprive her own rooms of their right to conditions in every way favourable.<sup>309</sup>

Although the configuration of family rooms as a suite was desirable it seems seldom to have been attained. On looking at other country house plans of the late 18th and early 19th century it is apparent that bedrooms, boudoirs and nurseries were often positioned close together, but in truth there are limited positions for rooms, particularly on secondary floors, that make close proximity of these rooms to be almost unavoidable. But it is the way in which de Grey created a such coherent suite of rooms that make it both successful and noteworthy. The family area forms a small

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<sup>309</sup> Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, From The Parsonage to the Palace: With Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans*. (London: John Murray, 1865), 138.

house at one end of a larger mansion. It might be seen to relate to the happy and companionable marriage between the de Greys, and of their love of children. It brings to mind the household of Victoria and Albert. It is one of the most unusual and hitherto uncommented upon elements of the house.

### **The Billiard Room, Gentleman's Room, Cloak Rooms and access to those rooms.**

The arrangement of the billiard room and associated rooms also form a coherent suite and is an early example of its type. De Grey had initially intended to locate the billiard room in a prominent location, in what became the ante-library in the central bay of the garden front (see figure 48):

It was originally intended to place the billiard table here. It would have interfered with the free passage to the window, but there would have been room to place it clear of the gangway along the suite of the rooms; and the ornaments and disposition of the ceiling were calculated to enable us to have the lights suitable for the table. However it was afterwards decided to give up this plan.<sup>310</sup>

Despite having discarded his initial plan De Grey still wished to incorporate a billiard room in a central part of the house so he positioned the room to the west of the entrance hall. This was a good location in that it could be entered directly from the front door (making it easier for gentlemen to find their way out after an evening of relaxation) and was also adjacent to one of the sets of WCs and cloakrooms. It is possible that the slight remove from the state rooms meant that gentlemen were permitted to smoke in this room. The arrangement of billiard room with cloakroom, WC and separate access to the front door was to become somewhat commonplace

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<sup>310</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

by the middle of the century but not much seen in the 1830s, again suggesting that de Grey's planning was ahead of the fashion as he arranged his billiard room in this manner from the start.<sup>311</sup>

De Grey's office, originally called My Lord's Room, but now just called the office, is well positioned. Although it is not attached to the family suite it is easily reached from there. In particular it should be noted that the room could be entered from the principal front door through a side door in the entrance hall, thus bypassing the main part of the house. It was also adjacent to the butler's suite and close to the eastern staircase, which would have offered access from the servants entrance in the Clock Tower Yard. This means that de Grey could receive visitors from various walks of life and that they could reach his office either through the polite entrance or through the servant's entrance.

### **The Light Wells and associated WCs and Cloakrooms.**

By the 1830s Bramah water closets were becoming popular, including in country houses. Joseph Bramah obtained the patent in 1778, for what was essentially the first flushing toilet. Over the century flushing toilets, known as water closets, were improved and became popular worldwide. In the 1830s they were still an expensive rarity. They needed to have external ventilation if they were to be at all pleasant which meant that they were generally either in non-ventilated areas which caused unpleasant odours within their vicinity, or that they were not in conveniently central

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<sup>311</sup> "By the mid-1850s the billiard room was beginning to have its own cloakroom, an arrangement that soon became standard and at about the same time a separate entrance began to be provided from the outside". Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 56.

locations. De Grey solved both of these problems with the sensible inclusion of a pair of generously proportioned light wells positioned centrally and symmetrically, one to each side of the central staircase hall, opening into back corridors that were not principal routes but were nonetheless conveniently located. From de Grey's plans of the house it seems likely that each of the ground floor WC areas had a cloakroom attached for visitors to use. This arrangement of WCs and cloakroom became fairly standard from the late 1840s onwards, making de Grey's inclusion of not one, but two such suites, each conveniently accessible, an early forerunner of a planning element that was to become commonplace.<sup>312</sup>

The light wells at Wrest Park are wide and provide daylight and air to the internal part of the house from basement to roof level. They also provide daylight to each of the pair of secondary staircases which rise through the building beside them and to the central corridors that run between the north and south ranges of rooms. At ground level they provide small courtyards. The pair of secondary staircases therefore have access to daylight making them more pleasant to use, and in the case of the western stairs, suitable for use by the family. I would argue that the light wells are one of the best elements of de Grey's plan, and the pairing of them with secondary staircases was ingenious. Perhaps the size of the light well is important here as at Wrest Park they are really quite large, which presumably helped with any issue of odour from the water closets.

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<sup>312</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 34.

## **The overall qualities of de Grey's planning arrangements in the house.**

As we have seen, the plan of de Grey's house anticipated fashions for country house layouts which would coalesce over the succeeding decades. The sense of order and of having specific rooms and areas for specific tasks and activities would become more commonplace over the succeeding decades, and were fully articulated by the architect Robert Kerr in his book *The Gentleman's House, or How to Plan Residences*, published in 1865.

In his comprehensive publication Kerr laid out, in full, a series of what he considered to be inviolable conditions within the planning and design of a successful residence. Although he wrote about all types of homes, from the humble to the grand, it is on the layout of large houses with a body of servants commensurate to the size of the house that he came into his stride.

Kerr was born in Aberdeen in 1823. By the 1840s he had qualified as an architect and had spent periods of working in both London and New York. In 1847 he and Charles Grey became the founding members of the Architectural Association, a body created with the intention of providing an alternative source of training for architectural students to that which was currently available. Kerr became a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1857. As a practising architect his output was modest in quantity, but he became influential after the publication of his book on

residential architectural planning. Franklin considers it to be, "The key book on mid-Victorian country houses and the first to deal systematically with planning."<sup>313</sup>

It was in no small part due to the success of his book that in 1865 Kerr won the commission to build a country house at Bear Wood for the owner of The Times John Walter.<sup>314</sup> This large, complex and almost prohibitively expensive house was the principal commission of Kerr's career, and one on which he staked his reputation in attempting to put his teachings into practice. Of Bear Wood Pevsner had this to say:

But the climax, and in its brazen way one of the major Victorian monuments of England, is Robert Kerr's Bear Wood.<sup>315</sup>

It is interesting that Pevsner considered Bear Wood as the climax of Victorian country house architecture, given that according to him:

Victorian architecture is heralded by the fanfare of Wrest Park.<sup>316</sup>

Kerr's book was published 25 years after the house at Wrest Park was completed I believe it is interesting to compare what was contained within it with de Grey's layout. It was the first book to provide a comprehensive account of planning, and as such can be viewed as a confirmation of what was considered essential in space planning through the Victorian country house building period. Any similarities between his recommendations and de Grey's house might suggest that de Grey's design pre-

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313 Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 1.

314 Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Berkshire*. (London: Yale University Press, 1966, 2002 reprint), 79-82.

315 Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Berkshire*. 1966, 45.

316 Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England. Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough*. (London: Yale University Press, 1968, 2002 reprint), 26.

empted planning principles that over the following decades would become not just a given, but the height of fashion.

The coherent planning that de Grey brought to bear in his house is one of the elements that lifts it above other houses of the 1830s. In particular the coherence of the family suite, gentleman's room and butler's pantry are among the best examples of how the fully realised Victorian country house operated. Prior to the 1830s space planning had, very broadly, been neglected. Houses were designed to hold a series of beautiful rooms, but without any close consideration being given to the flow of rooms and particularly to the convenience of the staff. An examination of house plans from the late 18th to the late 19th century has demonstrated to me that formal attention to ensuring that a house functioned well on all levels came together during this period, with writers and architects beginning to give much greater consideration to such matters, as demonstrated by publications such as Kerr's.

Country house plans, particularly in reference to service areas, evolved over time to incorporate all of the elements that we would now recognise as typical for country houses, but in the 1830s this was not yet quite the case and de Grey's attention to the detail of this was in some ways representative of a new way of thinking about the internal and external planning of a residential building. As Wilson and Mackley comment:

Few owners of pre-1830 houses, had they read Robert Kerr's *The Gentleman's House*, could have countered his stress upon the need for Privacy, Comfort,



Convenience, Spaciousness, Compactness, Light, Air and Salubrity, Aspect and Prospect.<sup>317</sup>

In the 1830s de Grey achieved a house layout that was very much the innovation for the times, and one that would be replicated in similar forms over the succeeding decades.

### 3. The Form and Layout of the Service Range.

Family Apartments have to be contrived for occupation; but the offices for work.<sup>318</sup>

In his memoir and his account of building the house de Grey makes little more than passing references to the service range of Wrest Park. It is easy to be dismissive and assume that he was not interested in this element of the house. But the layout of the service range is in fact sufficiently well put together and successful that it is reasonable to assume that there was an interested or experienced hand in its design.

De Grey claimed to be his own architect and explained in some detail the circumstances of the building of his house at Wrest Park. It seems an odd omission then, that he makes no more than passing references to the creation of the service range, particularly as it is so well thought out.

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317 Robert Wilson and Andrew Mackley, *The Building of the English Country House*. (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2000), 273.

318 Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, From The Parsonage to the Palace: With Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans*. (London: John Murray, 1865), 198.

As the Victorian era progressed, service ranges became increasingly large and complex, a trend which de Grey anticipated in his design of the service areas at Wrest Park. Girouard outlined the increasing complexity of service ranges:

Victorian analysis of activities and their containment in separate spaces reached its most frenzied elaboration in the domestic offices. Robert Kerr, in his classic exposition of high-Victorian planning, *The Gentleman's House*, divides them into nine divisions, made up of Kitchen Offices, Bakery and Brewery Offices, Lower Servants' Offices, Laundry Offices, Bakery and Brewery Offices, Cellars Storage and Outhouses, Servants' Private Rooms, Supplementaries and Thoroughfares.<sup>319</sup>

Without articulating it in his written account of building the house, de Grey accommodated each of these areas within his plan for the service range and associated areas.

Country house service areas became large, often as large or larger than the house they served, and with a bewildering variety of rooms given to highly specialised tasks. The service range at Wrest Park can be considered to be an exemplar of the type, both in plan, size and proximity to the house. In earlier country houses the service areas were not always perfectly coherent, and the working conditions that were afforded were often severely lacking in any consideration for the servants. For example, in the late 18th century country house, Coole Castle, in County Fermanagh, the service range was located in a series of basements and the main house could only be reached through an unlit 80 metre subterranean tunnel in order that the neo-classical house could give the impression of sitting alone in the landscape, untroubled by the material considerations of where to cook the food.

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<sup>319</sup> Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 29.

Franklin noted that:

It is noticeable that where an 18th-century gentleman might well have remarked on the aesthetic effect of the building, his Victorian successor is more likely to comment on its comfort and convenience.<sup>320</sup>

De Grey gave great consideration the aesthetic effect of his house, and he was proud of it, but the able way in which he laid out its plan suggests that he also held comfort and convenience in high regard. The first consideration in planning the country house service area was its position. Service areas needed to be close enough to the main house for convenience and for the unimpeded comfort of the family and their guests, but they also needed to be if not actually invisible, then as discreet as possible. In architectural style and in apparent size they needed to be subordinate to the main house. This was harder to achieve than might be assumed given that some service ranges were larger than the house they served.

Separate, but adjoining service ranges did exist but were not common when de Grey was building. Basement service rooms had been more commonly accepted but a new country house would be expected to have a service wing that was at least in part at ground level. In the past kitchens were removed from the main house due to the risk of fire. This had been so since medieval times, even in smaller dwellings, but a well-designed service range could have a kitchen at a slight remove, in order to prevent the spread of fire or cooking smells to the main house, while being attached through service corridors. Once the location for the kitchen had been decided then

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<sup>320</sup> Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 240.



of the house (see figure 53). The Westonbirt plan from 1900 shows the full extent of the service range (see appendix 3).

### **The Butler's Pantry and its proximity to other rooms.**

The suite of servants rooms that, through necessity, was closest in proximity to the main body of the house, was the butler's pantry and associated areas. The role of the butler varied slightly from house to house. Generally he would be the senior household servant, with responsibility for all the male household staff. Alongside the housekeeper and steward he formed the upper management of the house. His primary responsibilities were management of the dining room, pantry and provision of wine and sole control of the wine cellars. He would most likely also be responsible for greeting guests at the door, and on occasion providing valet duties for guests. There is no record of a butler at Wrest Park during de Grey's time, but it can be assumed that there would have been one, not least due to the provision of a butler's pantry.

The butler's pantry was a multi-purpose room that was the private domain of the butler, although during the day the footman might also have used it for carrying out his duties. It was used by the butler as his office, as a place for cleaning the plate and glassware, for decanting the wine, which he alone would have chosen and brought up from the wine cellars, and in the hours during which he was not working would have served as a private sitting room. In smaller houses it might also have served as his bedroom, but in larger establishments there would have been an adjoining bedroom. The plate safe was most commonly positioned in the butler's

pantry in order for him to guard the family silver at night. Sometimes there would have been a room for a footman to sleep in to provide a guard for the plate safe, but usually, and as was the case at Wrest Park, this duty fell to the butler. This was seen as being of high importance to the layout of the house and as one of the primary duties of the butler.<sup>321</sup> Even a cursory glance at the Wrest Park plan shows that the criteria of good positioning for the butler's pantry were met by de Grey, and very successfully. Not only is it located adjacent to the dining room, it is in ready reach of the servery, kitchen and cellars and close to de Grey's office. It has a window that gives on to the main entrance allowing the butler to fulfil his duties of answering the door and announcing guests.

The food would have been brought up from the kitchen by the footman.<sup>322</sup> There was the need for a room in which the food would be placed before being taken into the dining room, in order that it might be presented at the correct moment. In smaller houses this might have occurred in the butler's pantry, but it might be assumed that at Wrest Park there was a room specifically for this. Although de Grey did not identify it, it seems likely that it would have been in the small room to the east of the dining room, which is still fitted out for food preparation today, and has close access to the gib door at the rear of the dining room. A gib door is flush fitting and usually decorated to blend in with the wall. Essentially it is an 'invisible' door, most commonly used by servants, but also to disguise the location of adjoining rooms such as private

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321 "It is not unusual to place the door of the Plate-safe within the Butler's Bedroom. In fact, one of the most essential points in respect of the Butler's rooms is to provide against the theft of articles under his charge; and this idea must govern every question of plan". Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House: Or, How to Plan English Residences, From The Parsonage to the Palace: With Tables of Accommodation and Cost, and a Series of Selected Plans*. (London: John Murray, 1865), 222.

322 "It was the footman's job to bring up the various courses of the meal from the kitchen". Pamela Sambrook, *The Country House Servant*. (London: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1999), 27.

chambers. The fact that this room is still used for its original purpose is a testament to the good sense that de Grey applied to space planning.

The need for a series of rooms close to the dining room may seem strange, so it is useful to understand the complexity and formality in the serving of meals in a Victorian country house. Sambrook provides a good description:

The etiquette associated with serving a formal dinner was complex and changed over the years. In outline, the butler began each service by presenting the first dishes, removing the covers and passing them to the footmen who served, handed out condiments, kept the tablecloth tidied as the meal progressed and changed plates and cutlery when necessary. When not actually serving, the footman's station was behind his master's or mistress's chair, the butler's at the sideboard.<sup>323</sup>

This meant that there was the need for serving rooms, storage and scullery rooms and intermediate spaces for all the linens and dining ware that needed to be transported between the dining room and the service areas of kitchen, scullery and laundry all of which were included in de Grey's design.

### **Service rooms 'below stairs'.**

In considering the overall approach to space planning at Wrest Park it is essential to look at the layout of the rooms in the basement, starting with the kitchens and associated catering areas. Service ranges steadily evolved from the 18th century before hitting a peak in size in the late 19th century<sup>324</sup> and had a variety of specialisms, and a more organised approach to planning. At Wrest Park the bulk of

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<sup>323</sup> Pamela Sambrook, *The Country House Servant*. (London: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1999), 27-28.

<sup>324</sup> "But whereas in the eighteenth century children and servants often lived interleaved among their elders and betters, and rooms were well proportioned but not always useful, the essence of Victorian planning was segregation and specialisation". Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), p. 39.

the service areas were within an adjoining, but separate block, with access gained to the main part of the house through the half-basement, which became ground level at the junction with the service range. It was not uncommon to have the entire service range below ground<sup>325</sup> and de Grey's design must be seen as an improvement on this arrangement. It provided services in close proximity to the house while retaining the symmetrical French style of the house as the service area was all but invisible from the principal fronts.

### **The Kitchen and Scullery.**

The kitchen was in many ways the engine room of the Victorian country house. It needed to be perfectly located in order to facilitate the smooth running of the household mealtimes without being close enough to cause cooking odours to infiltrate the main house, a situation which appears to have struck horror into the hearts of Victorian country house families,<sup>326</sup> although as Franklin sensibly points out, "We tend to feel that the Victorians were being absurdly sensitive about smells, but a country house kitchen was coping with conditions far more like those of a modern hotel than a private house, and without extractors."<sup>327</sup>

As noted, at Wrest Park, the service range is attached to the main building, but of a subordinate architectural style. Inside however, it appears that for the most part the rooms were airy, light and well appointed, at least up to a point that was considered

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325 "...early Victorian houses often had the whole office wing sunk below the level of the main house". "Even if not sunk, the wing was kept as low as possible and treated as a single, unified block". Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 86.

326 "All Victorian architects were obsessed by the need to keep kitchen smells out of the rest of the house". Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 30.

327 Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 92.



acceptable. The kitchen is one of the few rooms at Wrest Park that is no longer in existence. It survives only as a roofless inner courtyard. Enough remains to give an impression of a large, high room, with high windows. The surviving Servants Hall is top-lit from a glazed lantern roof and it seems reasonable to suggest that the kitchen was also top-lit in this manner. The primary function of the kitchen was, of course, cooking. In larger houses most of the preparation would have been carried out in other specialised rooms, but mainly in the scullery. In smaller houses without a proliferation of food preparation rooms there would still always be a scullery. Kitchen and scullery were an essential duo in all but the simplest accommodation, with country houses having well designed and commodious rooms. The scullery at Wrest Park was fairly large and adjoining the kitchen. Along with the kitchen it became an open courtyard at some time during the 20th century, but the evidence left in the form of building archaeology points to it having been double height like the kitchen, and had windows high in the wall to facilitate a through draft of fresh air. De Grey created a kitchen suite that would have been able to provide for the entertainments for which the house was created, without compromising his vision of a French style house, sitting perfectly within the garden. Again, this confirms that he was more than an architectural dabbler, but was able to see the building as a functioning whole.

### **The Larders, Store-rooms and Bakehouse at Wrest Park.**

Larders needed to be situated conveniently close to the kitchen and scullery, without being adjoining as this might have made them difficult to keep cool. At Wrest Park there is a passage running alongside the kitchen and scullery which leads to a small

open courtyard of an unusual quarter-circular shape around which is a series of storage areas and the bakehouse. This area shows in de Grey a lightness of touch as an architect. It is a functional area and yet it is uncommon in its shape. The arrangement of kitchen, scullery and stores was very sensible. It had ready access to the dining room without being close enough to contaminate the air of the family rooms with cooking odours. The kitchen was well appointed and airy and twinned with a commensurately large and airy scullery. The larders and stores were close by, but in an area both sheltered and cool.

### **The Servants Hall.**

Next to the kitchen and scullery, but without a directly connecting door was the servants hall. This is where most of the servants took their meals although the upper servants might have eaten in the butler's pantry or the housekeeper's room. By the 1830s it was becoming common to segregate male and female servants, with them coming together only in the servants hall, so it is likely that this was the case at Wrest. It was the only communal space available to the servants who would have spent all of their free time there. The servants hall was often positioned at the far reaches of the service range, as the family would have been keen to keep the servants at a distance during their non-working hours.<sup>328</sup> In this case the servants hall is closer to the main house than the kitchen, although completely invisible and at a remove both vertically and horizontally within the plan as it was in the side of the

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<sup>328</sup> "...the Victorians insisted that the servants' hall should be as far from the main house as possible, even further than the kitchen." Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 97.

house which was raised over a basement level. It is also within easy reach of the butler's pantry.

### **The Housekeeper and Steward's rooms.**

The housekeeper reported directly to the mistress of the house, who would give her orders each morning regarding meals and the needs of the family and visitors. She was responsible for the efficient running of the house, including the management of the household budgets and the safeguarding of household items such as the linens and china. As the Victorian era progressed her responsibility for the virtue of her female staff reached very exacting proportions. The housekeeper presided over a set of rooms that were primarily her own domain. Her main room, much like the butler's room, was both office and store-room for more valuable items and provisions, and also served as a living room for the upper servants, and sometimes as her private sitting room. De Grey positioned his housekeeper's room across a passage from the kitchen, and placed an adjoining still-room and neighbouring store-room and china closet. In addition to this there was a separate housemaid's room close by, so that the housemaids had somewhere to carry out mending or cleaning work, and probably as a sitting room that segregated them from unnecessary contact with male staff members. Once again, de Grey showed a great deal of skill in his planning.



Fig 54: The fireplace from the old house, that de Grey put in the Steward's room.

The steward's room was next door to the still room and therefore easily reached by either the butler or the housekeeper. It is a large south facing room and has in common with the housekeeper's room a garden view. It must have been planned as a relatively commodious room as, until the early 20th century, it had a huge and ornate fireplace that de Grey relocated from the old house at Wrest (see figure 54). The fireplace was sold by J G Murray, the owner of the house from 1917 until 1934, as his finances began to fail. It was bought back by the Ministry of Works during the 1960s and installed, somewhat incongruously, in the orangery, where it remains. The steward was essentially the general manager and land agent for the estate and as such would have held the highest status of the household staff. It is quite in keeping

that his room would have had a fine quality fireplace. He would have been expected to play host to de Grey's business callers in de Grey's absence and to the upper levels of suppliers and tradesmen who kept the house running smoothly. The arrangement of the offices of the upper staff in such a way that they were in easy reach of one another yet positioned also so that they could carry out their duties and oversee the work of their respective members of staff is not unique, but of sufficiently good order that it marks this element of de Grey's house out as unusual for the time.

### **The Laundry.**

By the end of the Victorian period it was fairly common for a country house to use a commercial laundry service,<sup>329</sup> but at the time de Grey was planning his house an in-house laundry was still an essential part of the establishment. The type of work carried out in the laundry was of a disruptive and intrusive nature compared to other functions housed within the service areas. Heat, steam, a vast amount of water and the need for drying yards meant that positioning the laundry could be tricky. The laundry maids fell under the responsibility of the housekeeper so it was often considered beneficial to have them working somewhere close to her gaze, not least because laundry maids had a reputation for licentiousness, attributed by Franklin to the commonly removed position of the laundry which often had a separate entrance from the rest of the servants range.<sup>330</sup> In de Grey's plan he got around this by placing the laundry at the end on the service range, with a large walled drying yard that was out of the sight line of the windows of the main house. A covered walkway meant

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329 Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 97.

330 Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House*. 97.

that clean laundry could be returned to the house without being spoiled by the elements. All in all a very satisfactory arrangement, again showing that de Grey's plans were put together in a logical fashion.

The main house and the service range are part of the same building, but in reality they are two separate entities, each dependent on the other for their existence. It is testament to de Grey's skills that they are each very well planned buildings while also combining into a brilliantly designed combination of living and work spaces.

#### **4. Technology and Innovation at Wrest Park.**

It made sense to improve the work of servants through technology in order to make them more efficient, but only up to a point. It was, notoriously, cheaper to employ vast amounts of servants to carry water up to bedrooms for bathing, than to install running water, water heaters and bathrooms, and it was fine to use lamps instead of electricity if it was cheaper to employ numerous footman to carry out the arduous work of the lamp room than to go to the expense and upheaval of installing electricity. This is one of the reasons why in many ways and with one or two exceptions country houses lagged anachronistically behind in domestic technology which was led by industrial and institutional technology. For the most part this remained the case until the First World War caused a shortage of workers. After the war new job opportunities arose that were preferable to a lifetime of domestic drudgery that afforded little in the way of personal freedom for low wages. I will look at the main areas in which de Grey employed new or innovative technology in his house, with an emphasis on heat, light and water.

## **The reasons why country house owners chose to install new technologies, or chose not to.**

Most... houses of this date, however, remained surprisingly unmodernised and could continue to do so as long as there was still an army of servants to maintain the family in the state to which they were accustomed.<sup>331</sup>

In areas where running costs needed to be controlled technology was looked upon as a way to maximise productivity and to reduce staff and resource costs. As Girouard wrote, "On the whole, hospitals, prisons and lunatic asylums were centrally heated and lit by gas long before country houses".<sup>332</sup> Industry led the way in technological innovation. The mills and factories of Britain saw many forerunners of domestic technology. Perhaps for this reason it seems as though the nouveau riche were the first to adopt technology within their homes. They had already seen the benefits in the factories where they had made their fortunes. William Armstrong's house Cragside is perhaps the best known example of an industrialist employing the technologies of his industrial works in his home. Another example is Somerleyton in Suffolk, described by Palmer as having been:

Built in the late 1840s for the carpet magnate Frank Crossley of Halifax, a water tank was built into a tower and water pumped into it by a steam engine in a manner very similar to that which had been in use in textile mills for the first half of the 19th century, a feature with which the Crossleys must have been very familiar.<sup>333</sup>

The industrial world of mills and factories would have been alien to de Grey. His correspondence shows little interest in manufacturing. Any technology that he

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331 Marilyn Palmer. "The Country House; Technology and Society." *Industrial Archaeology Review*, XXVII:1, (2005): 99.

332 Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*. (London: Yale University Press, 1978), 263.

333 Marilyn Palmer. "The Country House; Technology and Society." *Industrial Archaeology Review*, XXVII:1, (2005): 99.

adopted in his homes was probably recommended to him through other channels. He did not write about making such improvements in his other homes, even when carrying out renovations. It seems probable that the costs associated with retro-fitting such domestic technologies as piped running water, gas lighting and central heating systems was greater than the costs attached to installing them in a new build. The new technologies that de Grey did use at Wrest Park might have been chosen simply because he was a practical man and it made sense to install while building rather than wait and decide to include, for example, a heating system later on. It would surely have been easier to convince himself of the need for a modern heating system in a modern house than it would to have considered the upheaval and cost of putting one in an existing residence, with all the disarray it would have caused.

It is easy for us to be surprised at the time it took for some innovations like gas lighting, and later on electricity, to become widely adopted but we must remember that for the country house owner there was no way of knowing what might be worthwhile and what might not be worth investing in. After all, "It was extremely difficult for contemporaries to assess which had a future and even the most promising, such as electric light, took decades to become really reliable, let alone economic".<sup>334</sup> There needed to be a good incentive for the country house owner to decide upon the installation of costly and potentially disruptive new technologies in the home. The most compelling reason would probably have been anything that would increase the comfort or status of a house. "Country house owners would install new appliances only if they were convinced, perhaps wrongly, that their comfort

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<sup>334</sup> Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 107.



would be increased by doing so. New machinery was never put in to save labour, though labour saving quite often resulted as a by-product".<sup>335</sup>

## **Technology at Wrest Park. What did de Grey install?**

A cursory look at the surviving evidence for the inclusion of early domestic technology at Wrest Park would suggest that de Grey had some interest in it and had wanted to make his house as modern as possible. This can be witnessed in the installation of an early central heating system, a number of water-closets and a comprehensive set of tension sprung service bells for which evidence remains in the house. But largely, there it ends. Although there was running water de Grey did not utilise an innovative pump. If there was gas lighting it was only in the service areas. De Grey seems to have spent a great deal of thought, effort and time on the style and layout of the house, but in matters of domestic technology the house is largely unremarkable. The few exceptions to this are explored in this section.

## **Heating.**

By the 1830s people were starting to install warm air heating systems in country houses and larger homes but it was not a common practice. The difficulties that surrounded the finding of suitable locations for the furnace room and associated mechanics meant that they were much more likely to be built into new houses rather than being retro-fitted.<sup>336</sup> Warm air central heating systems were gradually replaced by hot water systems but there was a short period of crossover where a combination

<sup>335</sup> Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 107.

<sup>336</sup> Marilyn Palmer and Ian West, *Technology in the Country House*. (Swindon: Victoria Trainor Publishing, 2016), 104.

of the two systems was used, and Wrest Park was one of only a few houses to utilise such a system.<sup>337</sup> Using this rare type of central heating makes Wrest Park unusual. It is also of interest that due to the considerable length of time during which the system was used its remains are largely intact. This places Wrest Park in an important position in terms of adding to our understanding of the evolution of domestic heating systems. As West and Palmer wrote, “Wrest Park is notable for the surviving evidence of its original heating systems.”<sup>338</sup>

The furnace is housed in a chamber under the basement room which lies below the staircase hall. The furnace did two things. It provided warm air for the heating system and warm water which was piped either through the basement as a hot water supply for service areas or to radiators hidden behind decorative grilles in false bookcases in the ante-library. In houses where a heating system was installed its benefit was usually confined to corridors, stairs and halls.<sup>339</sup> This was partly because of the suspicion of the unhealthy nature of breathing in heated air, and partly because rooms could be heated by a fireplace much more easily than the thoroughfares of the house which even if they had a fireplace were often hard to keep warm due to their large and open nature and being subject to through-draughts. At Wrest Park the warm air is vented up from the basement through brass grilles in the floor of the staircase hall (see figure 55). This is almost certainly an original feature, and is indicated in the building accounts. There was no fireplace in the staircase hall

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337 “...evidence from two properties shows that systems combining warm air and circulating hot water were utilised, at least briefly”. Wrest Park and Audley End House are then cited as having had a combination of warm air and hot water central heating systems. Marilyn Palmer and Ian West, *Technology in the Country House*. (Swindon: Victoria Trainor Publishing, 2016), 105.

338 Palmer and West, *Technology in the Country House*. 105.

339 “Early Victorian central heating was normally reserved for the hall, stairs and corridors.” Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 110.

meaning that the hot air system was the only heating in that area. Palmer and West believe that in addition to the hot air heating in the staircase hall there was a hot water system heating the ante-library and perhaps for the entrance hall. They believe that the enclosures for radiators in the ante-library are an original feature,<sup>340</sup> which seems very likely. In their report, Fadden and Turner mention the hot water pipes from the furnace in the cellar but do not mention a hot water heating system, instead positing that the pipes were solely for the supply of hot water.<sup>341</sup> It seems possible, given the reference in the building accounts to both heating and hot water supply that the boiler facilitated a combination of hot running water and heated radiators in addition to the hot air heating in the staircase hall.

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340 Marilyn Palmer and Ian West, *Technology in the Country House*. (Swindon: Victoria Trainor Publishing, 2016), 106.

341 Kevan Fadden and Michael Turner, "Photographic Survey of an Early Nineteenth Century Heating System for the Stairs and Foyer of Wrest Park." *Silsoe. Ampthill and District Archaeological and Local History Society*. 2004.



Fig 55: Brass ventilation grille in the floor of the staircase hall.

The rest of the house was heated by open fires, with fireplaces in almost every room in both the main house and service range. Clearly there was the need for a great deal of coal. Coal would have been kept in modest quantities close to areas where it was needed in order to minimise the work and time of moving it around on a daily basis. For example, there was a coal room near to the kitchen to provide for the kitchen range. On the upper floors there were housemaids closets in which smaller amounts of coal would have been kept for efficient supply to the bedrooms and dressing rooms. The main bulk of the coal was stored in cellars. There are two very large coal cellars in the basement at Wrest Park under the ground floor rooms of the north front. They were supplied through delivery chutes at the front of the house, an unusual arrangement when in most houses there was the desire to keep hidden

unsavoury activities like the coal delivery. The benefit of having the coal stored under the house was that it was dry and easily reached, having one cellar in the west side of the house, and one in the east.

The size and shape of the house would have been part of the way in which temperature was controlled. Unlike the more usual rambling plans of Victorian country houses, the plain double-pile formation, essentially a double cube, means that the house retains its heat quite well in the winter, while having suitable bulk coupled with the sun shades on the south facing windows, to remain cool during the summer months.

The heating that de Grey provided for his house was generally in keeping with other country houses of the time, but the combination of wet and dry central heating for the main circulation spaces was highly unusual and is one of the elements that gives Wrest Park an important place in the history of country house development.

## **Light.**

The house was built before the advent of electric lighting which became available much later in the century<sup>342</sup> and although the 1882 OS map shows a gas works near the stables at Wrest there is no evidence to indicate that gas lighting was installed as the house was built. The sale catalogue from the 1917 estate sale mentions gas lighting in basement and service areas, but not in the state rooms or family areas.<sup>343</sup>

Instead, lighting was probably provided through a combination of open fires, candles

<sup>342</sup> "Electric light first became practicable for domestic use in 1879". Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 116.

<sup>343</sup> Particulars of Wrest Mansion with Grounds, Park, Woodlands and Home Farms, comprising an area of about 1,668 acres. 17 July 1917. AD3237 BARS.

and lamps. The lamps on the main staircase are Argand oil lamps, now converted to electricity. The 1917 sale catalogue lists a significant number of lamps and candle holders, leading to the assumption that in de Grey's house, lighting technology was not adopted at an early stage. Writing about her childhood years of the 1870s and 1880s spent at Wrest Park, Ettie Desborough recalled that:

The downstairs rooms were lit by lamps, wheeled around the house on trolleys, but in the upstairs rooms there were only candles – few and far between, and I well remember groping through the darkness of Pammy's sitting room towards the two little twinkling stars by which she read.<sup>344</sup>

De Grey was motivated by the aesthetic success of his house and felt that the use of chandeliers was more appropriate for his French style interiors. In his account of building the house he wrote of the drawing room that, “Glass chandeliers have gone out of the fashion so much for many years that you scarcely ever see one. But they appeared to me to be the most appropriate style for this room.”<sup>345</sup> In his approach to lighting it might be seen that de Grey was not innovative. The use of lamps and candles was standard in country houses of the time and de Grey evidently did not feel the need to experiment with incoming technology.

## **Water and Sanitation.**

As has been discussed, in space planning de Grey either gave the matter a great deal of thought or he sought expert advice or both. The same was true of water supply and sanitation which was fairly comprehensive for a country house of the period. A ready and available water supply is the primary need of any dwelling, and

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<sup>344</sup> Ettie Desborough, *Eyes of Youth*. Unpublished memoir in private collection. 22.

<sup>345</sup> A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

the scale of the requirement is of course commensurate with the size of the household. The location of any country house was dependent on an accessible water supply. Wrest Park is built within half a mile of the River Hit and has a fresh stream immediately to the south-west of the walled garden. Having a nearby water supply was half the issue. Once a supply was secured there was the matter of transporting it around the various estate buildings and of course a plentiful supply was required for the family and their guests, within their suites and bedrooms. As Palmer and West noted that:

In most cases, water was not available above the basements or ground floors of many houses before the 19th century, and the household relied on the work of a large number of servants to carry water around the house, as well as to remove the waste. This servant army enabled ladies to continue using their private facilities of close stools and hip baths in front of blazing fires for some years after technological improvements meant that more modern facilities were available.<sup>346</sup>

In addition to many well preserved elements of de Grey's original water system at Wrest Park, there is also a plan drawn up by de Grey's Clerk of Works Clephan in 1841 showing pipes and drainage (see figure 12). From this evidence we can make an informed assumption about the degree of complexity that de Grey employed in the water system for his house. The water supply was managed in a few different ways. There were a number of tanks and two different pumping methods. There was a well near to the laundry from which water was drawn using a horse drawn pump, which pumped water into the main supply for the house. There was also a ram pump in the garden which was later converted to supply the fountain but initially pumped water up into the pair of large cisterns in the roof. The roof top cisterns, which are not

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<sup>346</sup> Marilyn Palmer and Ian West, *Technology in the Country House*. (Swindon: Victoria Trainor Publishing, 2016), 47.

visible from ground level, were connected to each other by pipes. The tank on the west side fed the water closets on that side of the house and the other tank fed the rest of the water closets and the service range. The conservatory also has a large tank beneath it, fed by rainwater. In addition to this there were a number of other tanks associated with service areas. Although not much of the internal pipework now exists, it is tempting to speculate that given the comprehensively arranged water supply in the house that there was some running water. Looking at the plan of the house it becomes clear that each of the sets of water closets adjacent to the light wells opened out from a small chamber, presumably a cloakroom, which had ample space for a hand basin with running water, known as buffets. It seems likely that there would also have been running water in the butler's pantry or nearby. On de Grey's 1833 plans the second floor rooms beside the light wells have "sinks" marked, suggesting running water.

Clearly a ready supply of water was needed for activities within the service range but the other main area of water consumption was for washing and bathing. Country house owners were slow to install bathrooms. This was partly due to it being easier to simply employ staff to transport water around the house, and until the 20th century also cheaper. Wrest Park seems to have been no exception. Ettie Desborough recalled that in the 1870s, "There was only one bathroom in that lovely house, and I never knew it used."<sup>347</sup> The main reason that bathrooms were unpopular was that it was considered undignified to travel along corridors between bedroom and bathroom. It was much more private and comfortable to bathe in a portable bath in

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<sup>347</sup> Ettie Desborough, *Eyes of Youth*. Unpublished memoir in private collection. 22.



either the bedroom or dressing room in front of an open fire. It is most likely for this reason that de Grey did not create many bathrooms in his house. It was simply that the alternative to a bath by the fire in your own room was much less desirable. A lack of bathrooms in country houses is sometimes given as an example of how slow the owners were to adapt to new technology but in reality it was more a matter of taste and habit rather than an explicit refusal to engage with technology. As Franklin explains, “The scarcity of bathrooms in early Victorian houses in no way implied lack of comfort, any more than it meant going unbathed.”<sup>348</sup>

De Grey's plans of 1833 clearly mark water closets on the first floor, and on the ground floor the rooms beside the light well are of a size and arrangement that can only be for a WC. In addition to this the building accounts (see figure 56) show a sum of £3286.14.2 for “lead pipes, water closets etc”, which is a huge sum and presumably for a number of water closets rather than only the two that are explicitly indicated on the plan.<sup>349</sup> Country houses had large households and the disposal of the waste created must have been a continuous and arduous task, to say nothing of being logistically problematic. As this was the case it might be thought that technological solutions were a relatively late arrival.

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<sup>348</sup> Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its plan 1835-1914*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 112.

<sup>349</sup> Wrest Park Building Accounts X219/1 BARS.

		993. 4. 8	993. 4. 8
Lumber	Lead Pipes, water Closets &c,	3286. 14. 2	
	Newton for recasting Lead	332. 13. 6	
	Johnson for D.C.	90. - -	
	Warner for Brass work	448. 1. 8	
	May for Pump	213. 1. -	
	Newton and Barwell D.C.	40. 18. 1	
	Pontifer fitting up Brew house	281. 10. -	
	Filterer	8. - -	
		3700. 18. 6	
	Numbers Labor	1391. 16. 2	
			6092. 14. 8

Fig 56: Extract from Wrest Park Building Accounts X219/1 BARS.

Water closets were, as the name suggests, small private rooms with a convenience that was both plumbed in to a water supply and directly connected to a foul drain. Bramah's innovation of a one way flap or valve and the bend in the base of the pan meant that odours would be sealed both by a valve and a few inches of water. This was a monumental improvement on the odiferous and inconvenient potty arrangement that was the alternative. "...he claimed to have made 6000 closets by 1797, and they remained the first-choice WC for the well-to-do until improved designs were introduced in the second half of the 19th century".<sup>350</sup>

Given the popularity of Bramah water closets it is quite likely that they were the type installed by de Grey. Although water closets were becoming more commonplace they were by no means ubiquitous meaning that de Grey was a relatively early adopter of the technology. Certainly the number of water closets he seems to have had installed, and the convenient and well considered locations of them makes this

<sup>350</sup> Marilyn Palmer and Ian West, *Technology in the Country House*. (Swindon: Victoria Trainor Publishing, 2016), 64.

an unusual element for a house of the period. In matters of water and sanitation de Grey exhibited a mixture of embracing new technologies and retaining old habits but overall the house must have seemed rather modern in terms of its water and sanitation conveniences.

## **Service Bells.**

Bell hanging may be described as the art of conducting lines of wire, intended to ring a bell at one end, when pulled with a little force at the other, in all directions round the apartments and through the walls of a building, in such a manner as not to obtrude the view.<sup>351</sup>

Service bells were commonly used by the 1830s. Separate service ranges gave rise to the need for more efficient methods of communication. By the mid 18th century wire operated service bells were being used.<sup>352</sup> In existing houses the installation of wired service bells would have been disruptive and costly. Installation during construction was of course much more efficient. The remains of a comprehensive system of wired call bells are still in place at Wrest Park. They were almost certainly put in when the house was first built. There is an entry in the building accounts for, "Bell Hanger; Hanging Bells and making sundry alterations. £812.15.4".<sup>353</sup> which would support the bell system being original to the house. Although no bells remain there are a number of call handles, including a pair in the Library labelled 'Servants Hall' and 'Groom of Chambers'. A secondary electric call bell system was fitted at a later date and some electric call buttons remain. Conveniences such as modern call

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351 J. C. Loudon, *An Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014 reproduction of 1833 publication), 282.

352 Marilyn Palmer and Ian West, *Technology in the Country House*. (Swindon: Victoria Trainor Publishing, 2016), 131.

353 Wrest Park building accounts X219/1 BARS.

bells must have made de Grey's house must seem not only beautiful, to his visitors, but also a model of efficient living.

### **Dining Room Wall.**

De Grey appears to have been a moderate adopter of new technologies, but one area where he was willing to push the boundaries of his new house was with his theatrical performances. His family was always close, but after the death of his wife in 1848 de Grey became even more involved in the lives of his daughters and grandchildren. One of the activities they enjoyed together was the creation and staging of theatrical performances. As these performances became more ambitious and accomplished, so de Grey's aspirations for a suitable staging area grew. By 1851 he decided upon converting the Dining Room into a dual purpose space with one end able to be used as a stage. The family were evidently dismayed at the suggestion, urging him instead to build a small private theatre somewhere else on the grounds, pointing out, not unreasonably, that there was plenty of space. He was not dissuaded from his idea:

There was weight in all this, but a consideration of distance, and the difficulty of building or making a communication with dressing and waiting-rooms etc. made me decide upon adopting my plan.<sup>354</sup>

Once decided de Grey sketched out his plans before passing them to his then Clerk of the Works, Watson, who drew them up to his satisfaction. He spoke first to Mrs White, presumably his housekeeper, to get her on board with the plan and to, “prevent breaking her heart”<sup>355</sup> before proceeding with the works:

<sup>354</sup> A. F. Cirket, “Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House.” *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

<sup>355</sup> Cirket, “Earl de Grey” 66-85.

The wall behind the sideboard (of brick) was carefully taken down, leaving the ceiling and cornice of the recess untouched; a hanging partition of wood, covered with floorcloth (without any seam) and painted and rubbed down, was suspended from the top; and by turning a small handle, which put two cog wheels in motion, it was conveyed along two iron rails across the space formerly occupied by the stairs and the lobby, leaving that space open to the dining room, and adding I believe about 12 or 13 feet to the depth of the stage. The opening formerly used for the stairs was floored over in such a manner as to leave a future trap-door from the basement for fairies or scenery to rise; a piece of mechanism I believe very few private theatres could boast of.<sup>356</sup>

The following year he added a scenery painting studio, in one of the workshops in the Clocktower Yard, and introduced tiered temporary seating for between seventy and eighty audience members. Despite de Grey's views on the matter it might actually have been simpler to build a small new theatre somewhere in the grounds than to convert an existing room. His family were upset at the thought of destroying what they considered to be a beautiful room and the relocation of the service stairs would have been a significant and disruptive piece of work. It would also have affected the ease with which the butler would have been able to move around that part of the house, at least while the movable wall was pulled back to create the stage. He had evidently made up his mind despite the apparent shortcomings of the scheme but it seems his vision was rewarded. In any case the dining room theatre would be used at least until the end of his life. The wall no longer moves and there is little indication remaining of either a trapdoor or any part of the mechanism. What can be seen though is that the corridor to the rear of the dining room is unusually wide. De Grey's initial plan of the house shows a staircase in this location, coming up from the service rooms below, presumably giving access from the kitchen to the

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356 A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85.

dining room. The service stair is now slightly to the east of this position, leading to the conclusion that de Grey did indeed move this staircase. The moving rear wall of the dining room was a unique feature. No other country house has a room that could be temporarily converted into a theatre in this way. The technological innovation required to make the plan a success is unique to Wrest Park. Some time between de Grey's death and the mid-20th century the moving wall was taken down and replaced by a more conventional fixed wall. All that remains of de Grey's theatrical vision is a peculiarly proportioned service corridor to the rear of the dining room.

### **The Walled Garden.**

The walled gardens represent the 19th century fashion for well run produce gardens, in this case coupled with beauty. Victorian walled gardens varied in size, from the very large, such as the one Paxton designed for Chatsworth House of thirteen and a half acres, down to the more usual size of three acres. The walled garden at Wrest Park is six acres which is by the standards of the time large for an estate of the status and size of Wrest Park, but not inordinately so. Kitchen gardens "...ranged in extent from 1 acre to 20 or even 30 acres depending on the size of the household. One acre was expected to supply enough produce for twelve people. It was calculated that two to three gardeners were needed per acre, and that a third of the area would be occupied by glasshouses, frames and pits".<sup>357</sup> The walled garden would have produced much of the fruit and vegetables for the house. Produce from the garden at Wrest would also have been sent to the family house at St James' Square in London. The intensive nature of walled garden production meant that

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<sup>357</sup> Susan Campbell, *Walled Kitchen Gardens*, (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications Ltd, 2006), 5.

there would have been a number of staff working there, representing a boost to local employment.

By the 1830s it was usual for the kitchen garden to be placed in a location invisible to the house<sup>358</sup> but at Wrest Park, not only is it visible from the house, but one of the main axial views from the house from the Countess's Sitting Room through the Conservatory and right through the kitchen garden, was designed to incorporate this view:

My Lady's conservatory opens out of her sitting room, and all the doors and gates from her fireplace to the furthest extremity of the kitchen-garden are so disposed that she can see the whole length and inspect every dung barrow that is wheeled in at Snow's house.<sup>359</sup>

If the size of the kitchen garden was linked to the size of the household then in this case it might have been a visible sign of wealth and status. It is to be presumed that Lady de Grey showed a keen interest in the every day workings of the garden, to be desirous of an uninterrupted view of them.

Innovation in productive gardens was becoming part of the gardener's repertoire, with new varieties of produce being bred and methods of maximising yield developed. The walled garden at Wrest Park was the subject of 19th and early 20th century magazine articles which reflect this trend. "In 1854 the Cottage Gardener (July 27), describes the 'Kitchen and Fruit Garden' as containing Pineries, Vineries, Peach and Plant Houses all kept in perfect order'. The head gardener (Mr Snow:

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<sup>358</sup> "A large kitchen garden complex and all its working parts should... preferably not be visible from the house," Susan Campbell *A History of Walled Kitchen Gardens* (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications Ltd, 2015), 25.

<sup>359</sup> A. F. Cirket, "Earl de Grey's account of the building of Wrest House." *BHRS* vol. 59. (1980): 66-85. Mr Snow was the Head Gardener at Wrest Park from the 1830s until the 1870s.

after whom Mr Snow's Early White Broccoli, and Snow's Matchless Lettuce is named) was noted for experimenting with techniques in the gardens."<sup>360</sup>

In matters of technology de Grey appears to have taken a pragmatic approach rather than being lead simply by a desire to innovate. In areas where the running of the household could be streamlined or the living conditions improved, such as with central heating, he was happy to adopt new technology. Likewise, in areas for which he had a particular interest, such as making improvements to his theatrical entertainments he felt enthused enough to experiment.

## **Chapter conclusion.**

At Wrest Park de Grey created a house that was in almost every way original. That the house is exceptional is apparent from the visitor's first view of the place, with its unusually long façade providing the impression of an enormous range of buildings.

De Grey excelled in the area of space planning. The grouping of rooms, particularly with the creation of the family's private suite, is one of the things that makes the house unique.

The domestic areas are very well organised and are an early example of a type of large, coherent service range which would become much more commonplace over the following decades.

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<sup>360</sup> Wrest Park Conservation Management Plan, Gazetteer G; Dr. Twigs Way, The Landscape, English Heritage, 2005, X967/1/5/1. 245. BARS.



The use of technology for heat, light, water and drainage was limited, but has elements that are highly unusual, such as the boiler for both wet and dry central heating. In other areas de Grey was innovative, as demonstrated by the moving wall in the dining room.

The placement of the walled kitchen garden in such a prominent location is rare. It was more common to have the kitchen gardens at a slight remove, rather than being an integral part of the views from the main house.

The house that de Grey designed and built at Wrest Park is unlike any other. It is beautiful, original and well ordered.

## Conclusion.

When I chose to study de Grey and his house at Wrest Park a number of questions formed quite naturally. What sort of man was de Grey? Was he the architect of Wrest Park? Why is he such an unknown figure, given how well known he was in life? The house itself raises the obvious question of why de Grey selected a French style of architecture. Closer examination of the house brought to light other elements which made it unique and special, such as layout and technology.

De Grey was influential and well regarded during his lifetime. A series of high level public and royal offices meant that he was relatively well known in society. His wealth grew with each of a number of inheritances. Whilst not in the realms of the very richest men of his generation he was nonetheless able to build a substantial and expensive house within the space of just a few years. His position as a founding member and first president of RIBA marks him out as someone at the forefront of early Victorian architecture. He carried out both a grand tour, and subsequently travelled in the wake of Wellington, bringing his observations to bear in his design at Wrest Park. He was a man of strong convictions. His attachment to the Yorkshire Yeomanry lasted for his whole life and as a younger man he was at the forefront of an enthusiasm for yachting.

Despite all of his achievements de Grey seems to have largely been forgotten. The reasons for this are not clear but perhaps it relates to his lack of a male heir which meant that the family seat of generations at Wrest Park was not used as a primary

residence after his death and was subsequently lost to the family in the early 20th century.

De Grey regarded himself as his own architect at Wrest Park and his papers prove it. His memoir, along with a very helpful and detailed account of building the house written for his daughter, leaves the reader in no doubt that the choice of style was his own and that every detail came from his own mind. He had assistance from a gifted clerk of works named James Clephan but the design was his own. De Grey chose the style of building at Wrest Park in a considered way, experimenting with the gate lodges to confirm his choice. Rather than being down to a fondness for Frenchness he believed that the French style was the appropriate response to a (broadly) French style garden. It was conceived as an enhancement to the setting, which in turn would provide the perfect backdrop for his grand statement.

His inspiration for the house at Wrest at came from the architectural traditions of 17th and 18th century France. De Grey inscribed the names Blondel, Mansart and Le Pautre in a sculptural tableau above the door into the ante-library. Looking at their works the influence they had on de Grey is apparent, with some of the details from Wrest House seeming to have very close parallels, particularly in the case of Blondel's *Maisons de Plaisance*.

The prevailing architectural styles of early Victorian architecture did not include French. The house at Wrest is unique and important in this way. That is not to say that there was a single style at that time either. There was, alongside the more usual suspects, a move toward eclecticism, particularly within the sphere of country house

architecture. Palladian was no longer *de rigueur*. Wrest House, being specifically a response to the gardens, could be considered to be a representative of eclecticism, but also perhaps was simply a response to the setting informed by a sense of decorum. De Grey appears to have considered not only that a French style was correct for his house at Wrest Park, but that any other style would have been incorrect.

The house at Wrest Park was not only unique in style, but was also well designed and with a number of elements that lift it above the ordinary. In particular, the layout of the family suite was unusual. The combination of an *enfilade* suite of state rooms, to be used alongside a connected but separate family suite was an inspired example of careful space planning and reflects the de Grey's close family life. The plan of the service range was not only rare for the time, but also one of the earliest examples of a large yet conveniently structured working area. The house functioned as an elaborate machine.

The use of technology in the house has unusual elements such as the combined air circulation and hot water heating system, but did not employ some of the other emerging technologies. This is partly due to a lag in the uptake of country house technology whilst servant labour was cheap and plentiful. The survival of much of the early heating system is another way in which the house is significant. Other innovations, like the moving wall in the dining room, did not survive but nonetheless represent de Grey's multi-faceted achievement in the creation of his house.

Thomas, Earl de Grey lived a long and full life. He left his mark in a number of ways, but it is his house at Wrest Park that is his greatest legacy. The house is truly remarkable and de Grey proved himself to be accomplished in its execution. It is a fully realised vision. It was constructed in a single phase and has not had any later additions to the main house or service range. Its interiors are unusually intact. It has no direct parallel as a French style country house in England during the period or indeed beforehand and later 19th century French houses in England were very different in character. The space planning was both highly successful and ahead of its time.

This account the house brings together all the disparate elements that it contains to confirm emphatically that in the creation of his house at Wrest Park, de Grey achieved something wonderful. A beautiful and comfortable building for his family to enjoy and for subsequent generations to admire.

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## Appendix 1. De Grey's Titles and Inheritance.

The Honourable Thomas Philip Robinson was born 8th December 1781.

His father died on the 20th of July 1786 leaving his son the title of the 3rd Baron Grantham. There was no financial inheritance as all his father had was his diplomatic pension.

In February 1807 he inherited property at Craven in Yorkshire.

April 1792 brought de Grey a change in circumstances with the inheritance of a “large fortune,” the property of Newby Hall in Yorkshire and the title of 6th Baronet Grantham of Newby. “Little as I then thought of it, it was in fact the foundation of the position in life which I have since had to fill”.<sup>361</sup>

Also in 1792, “the lunatic”<sup>362</sup> Norton Robinson died, leaving Newby Park to de Grey, but not a large amount of money. Newby Park was the Robinson family home and de Grey's father had been carrying out “considerable additions to the house which were incomplete at the time of his death”.<sup>363</sup>

In 1802 de Grey's minority was terminated upon his twenty-first birthday and the following year his Ward of Chancery ended and he came into full possession of his inheritance.

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<sup>361</sup> “Memoirs of Earl de Grey,” CRT 90/45/2 BARS

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

In 1813 the last part of Newby Park, which had been retained by Norton Robinson's sister, came to de Grey upon her death.

De Grey's maternal aunt, Lady Amabel Lucas, Countess de Grey, died on the 4th of May 1833, leaving him the estate and house at Wrest Park, number 4 St James' Square in London, and the title of Thomas Philip de Grey, 2nd Earl de Grey.

The last inheritance of any substance came to de Grey in July 1845 when upon the death of Mrs Lawrence he came into possession of Studley Royal.

## Appendix 2. Black Dwarf Article

An Account of the York Hussars. Commanded by Lord Grantham, and recently inspected by Sir J. Byng, K.C.B. From *The Black Dwarf*, Wednesday June 30 1819. Transcribed from a 'Digitized by Google' document.

What are those whisker'd and moustachio'd things?  
Soldiers? Oh! No! They're *skittles* made for kings!

Though it is sedition to converse *with* things in soldiers habits, if they take the national allowance daily, it is yet none to talk of those brainless blocks, who, in time of peace, continue to ride about in party-coloured clothes, and insult good sense by wearing the supposed garb of courage, in compliment to some local friend of the Pitt system, who is fool enough to think that such scare-crow exhibitions can intimidate the people. The Yorkshire Gazette treats us with a fine speech of Lord Grantham's, to a body of those automata of men, heretofore called Volunteer Yeomanry Cavalry, but now dignified, by themselves, with the sounding appellation of YORK HUSSARS! The old epithet had become worn out; and not a child was to be frightened by the *Yeomanry Cavalry*! It was therefore necessary to have a more terrible designation; and as nothing English was likely to awe the acute Yorkshireman into submission, the German epithet of *Hussar*, was adopted: and, we dare say, these *hussars are very formidable fellows at a review or a dinner*; but for *shooting*, except at targets, partridges or hares, they had better let it alone. No sooner had these hussars put on their new names, but they appear to have discovered they were the same insignificant fellows as before. They therefore thought, as they were *called hussars*,



they ought to endeavour to *look like hussars*, at any rate! This they effected by forbidding the barber to attack the hair on their upper lip; and after waiting patiently for a few months, and enduring all the laughter and affection naturally called forth, they were ready by the day of inspection each with a pair of mustachios that might have frightened half the children in the country out of their senses. Some cavillers, it seems, were not satisfied that their neighbours should assume such a war-like appearance; probably knowing there was no foundation for it in reality; and these wags had raised the laugh against them to such an extent, that the gallant Commander of these gallant hussars, was called upon to express his opinion whether there was any thing ridiculous in the appearance of his brave men or not. Lord Grantham on this momentous occasion, made a speech becoming the commandant of the York Hussars! Here is an admirable extract, which we beg to recommend to the especial notice of the reformers of Yorkshire.

His lordship adverted to the alteration which had taken place in the name of the corps an alteration which he did not by any means disapprove of. - He would not detain them long in alluding to a circumstance so trifling in itself, as the wearing *mustachios* on the upper lip, which had been stigmatized by certain person in an attempt to *germanize* them. The fact was, that he, as commander of the regiment, had expressed no wish, nor issued any orders upon the subject; but it had arisen from the *right feeling*, and *good sense* of the corps; who when they had *taken* the name of Hussars, thought they ought also to assume their appearance. He was perfectly aware the existence of such a regiment was not a very agreeable circumstance to *certain persons* in the neighbourhood; and although they knew very

well they could not dissolve them by "*physical force*" yet they would endeavour to do it, by creating dissensions and distrust; and by striving to impress upon their minds that they were the whiskered tools of power; but he trusted if ever they had to *put down those gentry*, they would let them know, that *although they wore the hair on the upper lip, they could shave close*. His lordship thanked them for their attendance, and concluded by expressing his wish to meet them next year; and hoping they would all *go home, and shave their upper lips*, kiss their wives and sweethearts, and as they had been *good soldiers* whilst they wore the *military garb*, they would be *good farmers* when they got home, and put on their *plain clothes*.

This speech of Lord Grantham is a fine specimen of quizzing and humbugging: and it appears to have been delivered with due effect, for we are afterwards told the regiment separated with *three cheers*? For being told in effect they were *great fools*, and being recommended to *go home and shave themselves*! It may be a fine sport to Lord Grantham, who has nothing to do but ride about and amuse himself, that four or five hundred men (we did not suppose the whole county held so many simpletons) should make asses of themselves once a year, by a preparation of three months, and a good hussar-like mustachio cannot be grown in less time, to be told by Lord Grantham to *get themselves shaved*, before they offered to kiss their wives, or their sweethearts? What are they to do, in that respect, while the mustachios are growing? During which period they must leave their lips manured with dirt to forward the growth of their grissly crops? Then again his lordship jeers at their being *good soldiers* only while they had their mustachios and their party-coloured jackets on! And that it was necessary for them to leave off being good soldiers, to become good

farmers; as if the two characters were at variance with each other: and that putting on a smock frock made a farmer, and letting the hair of the upper lip grow was sufficient to make a hussar! What vile nonsense *a lord* can venture to speak before things who *dare not to be men*, lest his lordship should be offended! There was a time when a British farmer would have ducked any lord in his horsepond, who had dared to be so impertinent: but a British farmer, thanks to the taxes that have broken his spirits must be any thing that his lordship pleases.

His lordship is certainly making a game of the *hussars* whom he is addressing, when he tells them they did right to endeavour to *look like hussars*, by letting the *hair grow*, which he says was a mark of “right feeling”, and “good sense,” and then, immediately afterwards, tells them to go and get themselves *shaved*! Almost in the same breath. Do they not perceive they were only the jest of his lordship? He did not advise them to let their hair grow – on the upper lip: he never expressed a wish that they should have been so silly, nor gave any command for the folly – of course, *he* will not, out of courtesy, call them fools; but seeing the ridiculous appearance they made, he tells them, notwithstanding their “right feeling” and “good sense,” they had better get *shaved*! To be sure, he consoles them a bouuce (?) upon their skill in *shaving* others; and when they are called upon to put down “certain persons,” meaning the Public, their best occupation will be that of *barbers*; for as the public may not be inclined to wait till their mustachios grow and Lord Grantham says they are only soldiers when they wear them, they will not be of any use as *hussars*, and no “*physical force*” will be necessary to dissolve a body that only hangs together by *whiskers* and *mustachios*! An admirable bond of union! Really it was quite barbarous of the *lord*, to

pass sentence of destruction on the whiskers so unrelentingly! After the *hussars* had taken so much pains to make themselves look like soldiers, it was cruel to order them to shave off their martial appearance, and return home to their wives and families, (from whom they set off as fierce as turkey-cocks), as whey faced as so many geese. Only think of a few barbers ruining so many hussars in an instant, and metamorphose them from heros into carters and ploughmen! *The hussars in the suds!* Would be a fine subject for a caricature; and Lord Grantham might play the fiddle in one corner to enliven the corps.

While these things were playing at soldiers, - we beg their pardon, at *hussars*! The ground was kept by two squadrons of the fifth dragoon guards; and the real soldiers must have laughed heartily at the sports of the grown-up babies; particularly when the word was given to "go home and get shaved!" It will be a watch-word among the dragoons for years to come; and the *shaving hussars* will be a standing jest in the guard-room for ages, "*Go home and get shaved!*" What an assault to the *York Hussars*! Lord Grantham must have failed to cultivate mustachios on his own lip or he would never have been so severe upon the *hussars*!

We have bestowed more space upon this subject than its importance seems to warrant. But when it is recollected, the yeomanry institutions are a stratagem of the Pitt system, to array one portion of society against another, and to destroy by dividing the people, it is important while the finances will not allow of so great a standing army being kept up, that the real nature of these yeomanry should be exposed. They are generally speaking the fawning dependents, or the supple slaves

of the great, and with a few fools, and a larger proportion of coxcombs, who imagine they acquire considerable importance by wearing regimentals. As to soldiers, they resemble them not quite so much as automata do men. And their ridiculous assumption of being able to put down the people will one day be as dangerous as it is now contemptible. The compliments of such men as Lord Grantham cannot give them one iota of merit; and if this lord be a soldier, the constructive irony of his language must have been really intended to cover them with ridicule, that he might not be any further troubled with their foolery. In times of peril and difficulty, when general enthusiasm raises a whole people in defence of their liberty, the occasion supplies the want of discipline and tact, by energy and determination; but those who consent to parade in the garb of war, when there is no need of prowess, or possibility of danger, are actuated by a vanity totally destructive to the character of the soldier. And the idea of such things being able to “*put down*” a people rising in the arms of reason against their domestic despoilers is completely farcical. If they had courage to attempt such a deed, they would be traitors to their country; and would doubtless meet with the fate they were about to prepare for their fellow countrymen.



Appendix 3. The Westonbirt plan

## Appendix 3. The Westonbirt plan

## Glossary.

**Arcaded first floor.** First floor corridor supported on a series of arches, usually forming an area above a staircase hall.

**Ashlar.** Large stone masonry blocks with straight edges.

**Cortile.** Italian. An internal courtyard open to the sky.

**Double pile.** A building that is two rooms deep from front to back.

**Enfilade.** A linear range of rooms with doors aligned to provide a single view through the range.

**Gib door.** A secondary door, usually disguised as part of the wall, giving access to a private chamber such as a dressing room or providing discreet access for servants.

**Light Well.** An open space within the footprint of the building providing light and ventilation to the lower floors.

**Porte-cochère.** French. A covered porch large enough for coaches.

**Screens passage.** A corridor between the great hall and service rooms created by a screen.

**Sopraporta.** Italian. A painting or relief above a doorway.

**V joints.** Joints between ashlar blocks with a v-shaped indented profile.